

21.C

SCANNING THE FUTURE

issue 24

Sex Drive

J.G. Ballard and
David Cronenberg

by Mark Dery

Technopolitics

Money and power
on the Net

by Jon Lebkowsky

The Trickster King

Lee Perry, hi-technology
and ancestral forces

by Erik Davis

Datatrauma

Eastern Europe's Media Bloc:
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transit lounge

WAKE UP CALLS AND TRAVELERS' TALES FROM THE FUTURE

EDITED BY ASHLEY CRAWFORD AND RAY EDGAR, INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM GIBSON

Transit Lounge is the ultimate guide to new ideas for the new century. As the next millennium approaches, the *fin-de-siècle* is inspiring new conceptual paradigms. In a world where everything is up for grabs – information technology, the body, philosophy and even religion – *Transit Lounge* supplies possible answers and challenging speculations on our future. Carefully selected from the pages of *21•C* and *World Art* magazines by editors Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar, and with an introduction by William Gibson, *Transit Lounge* is a collection of 50 essays, interviews and articles by some of the most authoritative writers around the world. Subjects include such significant cultural figures as Phillip K. Dick, William S. Burroughs, Donna Haraway, Timothy Leary, Terence McKenna, Stelarc and Sandy Stone. Broader topics include the "posthuman", "infohype", the future of cities as seen by Mike Davis, the future of the Internet as viewed by Noam Chomsky and the role of feminism in the new information age as perceived by Sadie Plant. Authors include Kathy Acker, Mark Dery, Greil Marcus, Rudy Rucker, R.U.Sirius, Bruce Sterling, McKenzie Wark and Margaret Wertheim. *Transit Lounge* previews uncharted destinations with an authoritative voice. As the 21st century nears, this is essential reading.

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When J.G. Ballard's *Crash* first appeared in 1973 it became an instant cult classic. As radical in concept as William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, *Crash* was (and is) made even more disturbing by its inherently conservative narrative structure.

Now David Cronenberg has finally adapted *Crash* to celluloid. Cronenberg is arguably the only director who would have the courage (or foolhardiness) to attempt such a mission. Cronenberg has always directed on the edge, from *The Fly*, to *Videodrome* to his flawed, but intriguing version of *Naked Lunch*. His translation of *Crash* to film has been both lauded and loathed, causing a furor wherever it has appeared.

In 1984, Ballard told *ReSearch* magazine that "I'm glad, really, that *Crash* has *not* been filmed. Because I can see myself beginning to believe the movie version – my own imagination *deformed* by the damned thing, squeezed into somebody else's mold." Ironically, however, Ballard has become Cronenberg's most staunch and outspoken ally.

This issue, 21•C sent contributing editor Mark Dery on a road trip to tackle both author and director. The resulting in-depth interviews that appear in this edition cover a startling range of topics, from the (im)moral underbelly of North America to the nature of narrative structure in the postmodern world. Meanwhile, columnist Kathy Acker becomes addicted to Ballard's latest tome, *Cocaine Nights*.

Unlike most of the culture and technology magazines that have proliferated in the information age, 21•C refuses to blithely accept every new bit or byte. This issue, Dave Mandl ponders the future of the Net under Pointcast software and concludes that we may as well stick to the television set. Jon Lebkowsky investigates the future of activism on the Net, while McKenzie Wark reports on the strategic use of data between the East and the West in the post-Cold War era.

As a magazine devoted to the impact of new technologies on culture, we sent Alice Joanou to witness the robotic performances of Chico MacMurtrie; Erik Davis visits the world of Lee Perry where high technology meets ancestral forces, and Peter Zellner contemplates the surreal architectural world of Neil Denari.

Where Denari is largely a philosopher of strange new cities, Brasília remains the barometer of futuristic cityscapes, so much so that, as Julian Dibbell reports, aliens could well have had a digit in its design.

Ashley Crawford Ray Edgar

www.21c.com.au

White Line Fever

Kathy Acker reads J.G. Ballard's *Cocaine Nights*, and then reads J.G. Ballard.



the mystery

The first day I began reading *Cocaine Nights* I wrote, "This book is responsible for my not getting any sleep. I don't think it's equal to *Crash* in vision, but what does that matter because I can't put it down."

Little did I know.

Like *Crash*, J.G. Ballard's new novel is a love story. Which Cronenberg recognized in his film rendition of *Crash*. But this time, a love story and something more.

frontiers

"Crossing frontiers is my profession," says one Charles Prentice, perhaps as in *apprentice*, beginning the tale of his strange and dark journey into self-knowledge. Such a voyage, though no New Age trappings here, demands frontiers, for its hero must move out of non-self-knowledge or innocence and into wisdom. At the very onset, Charles Prentice describes himself as "a virtually innocent traveler"; he is a cross between Ballard and a typical Hitchcock protagonist, the innocent white adult male of, for instance, *North by Northwest*. Speak no evil, hear no evil, see no evil. Though he knows no evil, his brother, Frank Prentice, has been arrested and is lying in a Spanish jail. Since there's no evil in the world, how can this be? And so the mystery begins....

The journey the narrator must take to answer this question is into his self.

Charles Prentice is a no-man's land between autobiography and fiction, a typical Ballardian hero. "Those strips of no-man's land between the checkpoints," says Prentice, speaking both of his own geography and of the territory through which he has to travel to reach his incarcerated brother, "seem such zones of promise, rich with the possibilities of new lives, new scents and affections." Here is the usual Ballard

arena: environments constructed by methods deeply influenced by surrealism. Architectures formed by placing disparate materials next to each other, not via the rulings of chance, but rather via the strange laws of what Breton, in reverence to Freud, labeled the *unconscious*. According to Prentice, the territory where forbidden dreams and memories are exposed.

Charles Prentice/Ballard presents himself as a travel writer.

Bobby Crawford, the antagonist of *Cocaine Nights*, describes this geography – both the geographies found within *Cocaine Nights* and the very construction of the book – as "Kafka reshot in the style of *Psycho*"; at the end of his tale, Charles Prentice, remembering this phrase, will turn it into "Last Year at Marienbad for the 1990s... with a hint of Pasolini's *Theorem*."

Note all the frontiers, all the kinds of frontiers, here brought together.

innocence

The very way in which *Cocaine Nights* has been structured causes its reader to cross at least three frontiers. Prentice/Ballard not only describes himself as innocent, in the beginning of his tale, but also presents the tale as a type of Agatha Christie mystery. This species of mystery story is dedicated to innocence, for as its reader encounters evil, a necessary part of every mystery story or dream, that reader knows that this evil is only fictional, only a game, that he or she is safe. The end of the traditional whodunit is a clear solution: Innocence or goodness is preserved.

It is an easy game to present Ballard's cast of *Cocaine* characters in Agatha Christie format:

Frank Prentice – manager of Club Nautico. Accused of setting fire to the Hollinger residence while the Hollingers were still inside.

Mr Hollinger – a retired Hollywood magnate.

David Hennessy – the middle-aged treasurer of Club Nautico.

Bobby Crawford – a tennis professional, hired by Club Nautico. He seems younger than he really is.

Miguel – the Hollingers' chauffeur, who is still alive.

Blanche and Marlon Keswick – Englishwomen who run the successful Restaurant du Cap.

Gunnar Andersson – a handsome Swede who repairs yachts.

Dr Irwin Sanger – a silver-haired psychiatrist who is fond of his patients.

Elizabeth Shand – "part martinet, part bawdy-house keeper, the most intriguing of all combinations," a businesswoman who used to work with Mr Hollinger.

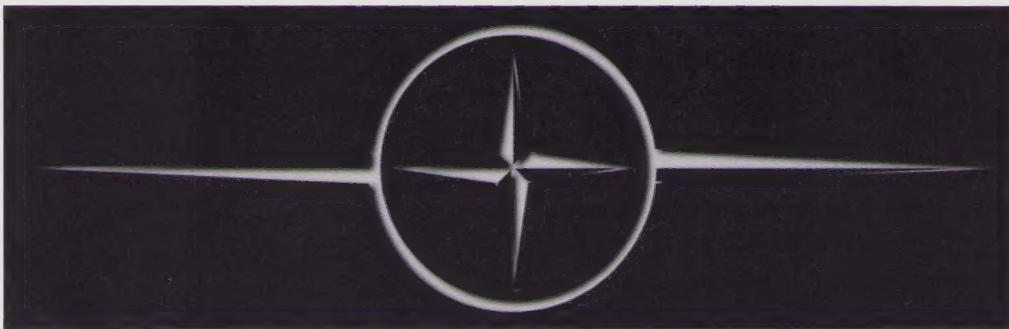
Dr Paula Hamilton – the sophisticated resident physician of the retirement community of Estrella de Mar.

And as in an Agatha Christie novel, the mystery or puzzle that must be solved if the book is to end and its reader be released from its fiction is crystal clear. Four people, Mr and Mrs Hollinger, their male secretary and their housemaid have died inside the Hollingers' own house after it was set on fire. Frank Prentice, the manager of the local sports club, inexplicably says that he is guilty. If he isn't, why is he saying that he is, and who actually murdered these four people?

With this usage of Agatha Christie, I am taken back to my childhood.

the loss of innocence – childhood

To get his brother out of jail, Charles Prentice must solve this puzzle. He realizes that, in order to do so, he has to immerse himself in the society, in the strange and alienating world of Estrella de Mar where the murders took place. "I sensed," Frank later adds, "that



I was going back home."

To free his brother, he must leave the territory of innocence, he must dissolve his identic boundaries, for he must become part of the strangeness of the world he is investigating.

If it is his brother's identity that is in question, it is also his. To leave the realm of innocence is to return to childhood in order to examine it.

The simple, if not simplistic, Agatha Christie structure yields to a more complex one. At this point in its trajectory, the structure of *Cocaine Nights* is that of two stories and two types of stories mirroring each other. The first is a whodunit; the second, the narrator's psychological investigation of his own childhood.

In the beginning, the geography of the second presentation is that of the family: a dad who fucks his middle-aged secretary while the wife is drinking herself to death. Even more, it's the picture of two brothers: The younger one, unable to help his mother and so full of guilt, makes himself anything but innocent. The elder, Charles, tries to protect his younger brother from himself, but can't. Out of love that sees itself as thwarted comes guilt.

No one can be innocent in the childhood landscape, this architecture "dedicated to the abolition of time." Charles Prentice/Ballard's description of himself as *innocent* in the very beginning of his narration is in question.

loss of innocence – love

While simultaneously investigating the Hollinger fire and his own childhood, Charles/Ballard slips out of

loyalty to his brother and transfers his fealty to the one who seems to be involved with, if not behind, all the evil in *Estrella de Mar*; the tennis pro, Bobby Crawford. A hidden homosexual love affair between protagonist and antagonist, as it did in *Crash*, sits in the center of this book. Charles identifies his younger brother, in his youth a minor criminal, with Crawford, who began his career with war crimes. As Charles/Ballard falls in love, whether sexually or not, with Crawford, and so abandons his brother to his fate, the structure of the book turns from whodunit, via a love story, to an essay in fictional form on the architecture of society.

fable

The argument of this essay – I'll present it baldly for that's the only way I can do it – goes like this:

Leisured communities are becoming the main, if not the only, way of life. Those fortunate enough to live in them, i.e. to retire while young, i.e. those fortunate enough to live, for the homeless are not considered to be alive, truly retire from life in that they retreat into a zombie state. "This is the way the world is going." Crawford is instructing Charles/Ballard. "You've seen the future and it doesn't play."

What is to be done? To echo a well-known question. "Politics is over, Charles, it doesn't touch the public imagination any longer. Religions emerged too early in human evolution – they set up symbols that people took literally, and they're as dead as a line of totem poles.... Sadly, crime is the only spur that rouses us." Crawford is trying to argue that the society of leisure

needs crime to maintain its vitality.

What is *crime*? "...anything that breaks the rules, side-steps the social taboos...."

Charles, out of love, takes over Crawford's argument. He tries to convince the lovely resident doctor that "He [Crawford] stumbled on the first and last truth about the leisure society, and perhaps all societies. Crime and creativity go together, and always have done. The greater the sense of crime, the greater the civic awareness and the richer the civilization. Nothing else binds a community together."

She replies that Bobby Crawford is worse than a thief, a drug smuggler, a porno producer.

"Everywhere you look," Charles/Ballard replies, "Britain, the States, western Europe – people are sealing themselves off into crime-free enclaves. That's a mistake – a certain level

of crime is part of the necessary roughage of life. Total security is a disease of deprivation."

The Ballard of *Crash* might have ended the dialectic here. No longer. By the time the narrator realizes the depths of Crawford's depravity, he's so in love with the tennis pro that he takes responsibility for Crawford's actions. As he once did for his brother's. He takes on the responsibility, as

guilt, that Crawford never accepted. From this point of view, it is love, not crime, that creates society. He takes on responsibility for the crime and criminality that must found society, accepts this guilt, and becoming sacrifice, re-enacts the original Christian myth.

Has J.G. Ballard turned to Christianity? What lies behind this turning?

"...Crime and creativity go together, and always have done. The greater the sense of crime, the greater the civic awareness and the richer the civilization. Nothing else binds a community together."

Is It My Body?

Autonomy is the last taboo of the medical professionals.



**This sounds like the
crazed rantings of a
dope fiend, and it is.

But so what? The
notion that our
bodies should
conform to our
agenda is already at
the center of
feminist and
transexual ideology.**

I'm really sick of the cliché, propounded by both the natural-healing profession and the medical profession, that we should "listen to our bodies." I propose a more reciprocal relationship. Our bodies should also listen to us. In other words, I want my body to cooperate with

my agenda. I'm not proposing to fight fate with wishful thinking. What I really want is for the medical profession, the pharmaceutical industry, the healing "profession" and the developers of medical technology to move further toward a collaborationist — as opposed to authoritative — relationship with the "patient."

In the 1950s, in the field of psychotherapy, Timothy Leary proposed a change in relationship between doctors and patients that has been largely adopted. The therapist would no longer

be the one to define optimal psychological health, make judgment on the patient's state, and offer the proscriptive and prescriptive regimens for improvement. Rather, the patient would be presented with a chart defining current behaviors and attitudes. The patient would then define where they wanted to get to,

according to a realistic assessment of their potential. The patient would define the goal of the therapy. The therapist would be a "coach," helping the patient get to where they want to go.

The medical profession needs to make the same transition. I'll make this personal. Right now, I have an ulcer and asthma. These conditions obstruct the life I both want and need. The social lubrication of going out for drinks, for instance, is seriously impeded. I can no longer use stimulants. Leaving pleasure (a perfectly valid need in itself) aside, these denials have their own consequences. Mixing it up in an alcohol-loosened environment leads to new relationships, connections, opportunities, projects. Occasional stimulants increase this writer's productivity and provide a clarity that results in life-changing decisions.

Recently, I went to several doctors about combating the restrictions on my lifestyle with stronger medicines. Three different doctors told me that — yes, it would be possible to prescribe stronger medications that might allow me to live more the way I would choose to live without increased suffering. But they weren't going to do that. They were all adamant that the patient must follow the proscriptions for the pathology, and that the *prescriptions* should be secondary. This attitude needs to change.

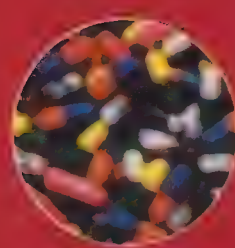
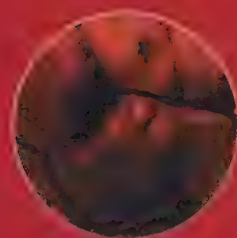
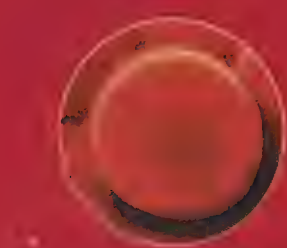
In my dream life, medical doctors are enthusiastic researchers keeping up with the rapid evolutions and discoveries in medicine, biomedicine, medical technology, natural medicines, *ad infinitum*. We get together with our doctors and tell them where we'd like to be optimally, without guilt or taboo. "I'd like to be able to drink one or two glasses of beer with dinner every

evening, doc. I'd like to be able to get an erection five times a day, doc. I'd like to be able to use a little pick-me-up a couple of times a week, doc. And party like a complete maniac on Saturday night." The doctor and I put our heads together. He's so well-informed that he knows of a new brain drug — it releases increased vasopressin without any side effects. Another drug, combined with a specific food, counteracts the acidic effects of alcohol consumption. *Ad infinitum*. Together, we chart a more satisfactory regime.

Crazy Like A Feminist

This sounds like the crazed rantings of a dope fiend, and it is. But so what? The notion that our bodies should conform to *our* agenda is already at the center of feminist and transexual ideology. Women have insisted on taking control over their reproductive processes. Sex change operations, or breast implants, are examples of medical procedures that require medical professionals to acknowledge an individual's agenda, and to give it precedence over the absolute ideal of risk-free care with intervention only in the case of physical pathologies. In this situation, the doctor becomes the coach and the patient defines the goal.

Of course, asking society to work toward potentiating autonomous drug taking by reorienting the medical profession away from authoritarianism and toward a collaborationist approach is pretty much tantamount to coupling a taboo and a pariah. But that's OK. This is the age of Jack Kevorkian and Larry Flynt. Just the other side of the neo-morality crusade of the mainstream media awaits a hailstorm of taboo smashing. Within my lifetime, I expect to be among the first human beings in civilization to be treated as a free adult. —





Trendspotting

BY MARK DERY

With the middle-class acceptance of all things Nike, brand identification is the new language.

"Tattooed Ears Cause New Teen Craze," a story that aired on NPR's "All Things Considered" on a recent April 1st, caught my ear. As a zero-tolerance critic of the growing encroachment of corporate influence on our everyday lives, I wasn't at all surprised by Noah Adams' report on Laser Splash, a breakthrough

technology that used lasers to etch logos on teenage earlobes in exchange for a 10 per cent lifetime discount on a company's products. "Alphanumeric bits" embedded in the paint enabled retailers to scan the tattoos at checkout counters. According to

Adams, several corporations, Nike among them, had already scrambled aboard the *trend du jour*. The company's glib young female CEO defended brand-name branding as a ritual of resistance ("a way to... take the idea of being bought and... throw it in their face") while maintaining, in the same breath, that logo tattoos were "interactive consumerism" – "a way of celebrating" the fact that, in an age of designer lifestyles, we're all "walking billboards," anyway. She sounded all the right notes, harmonizing boomer delusions of youthful rebellion in the Minoxidil years with Generation X's cherished vision of itself as immune to the not-so-subliminal seductions of consumer culture, inoculated by terminal cynicism. Listening to the NPR segment, I took grim satisfaction in the confirmation of my worst suspicions about commodity culture. Here, in the sale of the slacker body as advertising space, was the ultimate justification for anti-consumerist screeds. It was almost too perfect.

In fact, it was too perfect: "Tattooed Ears" was an April Fool's gag, played by

NPR on its listeners – among them myself, a supposedly wary cultural critic who has even written about media hoaxes, embarrassingly enough. But mortification turned to vindication only a month later, when the *New York Times Magazine* carried an item about EKINs (spell it backwards), the banzai, mostly 20-something male Nike employees who tattoo the company's boomerang-shaped logo (known as the "swoosh") on their calves or upper thighs. The concept of corporate vassals so gung-ho they literally tattoo their fiefdom's coat of arms on their bodies makes the fictional CEO's assertion that logo tattoos represent a gonzo "embrace" of the fact that "the corporation owns our souls" sound a little less laughable, all of a sudden. There's a creepy-funny resemblance, here, to the commodity future of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, where Japanese corporate serfs are tattooed with their company logos, and to present-day Japan, where a salaryman introduces himself by saying, "I am Toyota Company's Mr So-And-So," since an employee's corporate affiliation is his core identity.

Meanwhile, Nike, the world's largest footwear manufacturer and a self-styled "guerrilla marketer," is busy tattooing the body politic. My utterly unscientific study of the New York streetscape, based entirely on the evidence before my eyes, is that the swooshing of America is well underway: Baseball caps, sweat-shirts and other apparel bearing the Nike emblem, cryptic and conspiratorial as the mysterious post-horn symbol in *The Crying of Lot 49*, seems to be everywhere. The improbably named Duke Stump, an EKIN quoted in the *New York Times Magazine* blurb, may have been only half-facetious when he cracked, "It's a cult. But it's a great cult."

There's a marked tendency, in American culture, to define oneself in terms of brand-name affiliation. In an increasingly virtual reality, where the introspective psyche of McLuhan's "Typographic Man" has given way to what post-modernists call the "decentered self," spun off its axis by information overload, idiosyncratic purchasing patterns are emerging as a means of reinforcing the shaky boundaries of the self: I shop, therefore I am. Here at the end of the century, where gender roles, a government's obligations to its citizens and other features of the cultural landscape seem to be in flux, undermining our sense of who we are, nothing reifies like the niche marketer's gaze.

More immediately, in a culture where the semiotics of nonconformity are almost instantly appropriated by the corporate mainstream, the under-25 demographic that accounts for more than half of Nike's sales and more than 75 per cent of the basketball-shoe market collages a fierce individuality out of shared pop references, one-minute microfads, kitschy or whimsical products. The impromptu ruminations of a young black man interviewed in one of the "Mindtrends"™ marketing videos produced by the New York-based trendspotting firm Sputnik, are enlightening. "If Reebok made a line that was, like, a California line, catering more to the lifestyle in California, and then had something different for someone in Texas, that would be a little bit better, you know?" he says. "Because then you're not just falling into the crowd; you can actually set yourself apart." The barcode consciousness of mass culture is parried by a "nonconformity" fashioned, ironically, from the conspicuous consumption of brands that have earned the elusive youth-culture approbation that is every marketer's Holy Grail: "cool."

To be sure, there's no denying the guerrilla semiotics at work in kids' refunctioning of mass-produced goods; rave culture's embrace of pacifiers, cartoon lunchboxes and other kiddie gear as tokens of psychedelic infantilism is playfully perverse. Nonetheless, despite slacker pundit-turned-marketing-consultant Douglas Rushkoff's sweet dreams of the Powers That Be brought to their knees by "activist memes" such as *Beavis and Butt-Head*, it's a no-brainer that multinational corporations aren't losing any sleep over the hilariously '90s notions of subversion through channel-surfing and consumption as rebellion. As the advertising critic Leslie Savan points out in *The Sponsored Life: Ads, TV, and American Culture*, "Advertisers learned long ago that individuality sells, like sex or patriotism... [Commercials tell] the television-imbibing millions that they are secret rebels, freedom-loving individuals who refuse to be squished by society's constraints. Corporate America is always advising us that if we just buy in we can feel like irrepressibly hip outsiders. As the jingle goes, 'I like the Sprite in you.'"

The fiendish brilliance of American consumer culture is its ability to shrink-wrap our defiant gestures and sell them back to us as off-the-rack rebellion – a dynamic exemplified by Nike's notorious use of the 30-something button-pusher "Revolution," by the Beatles, to announce "a revolution in fitness." Embodied by CEO Phil Knight, a wild'n'crazy billionaire in jeans and mirror-shades who just can't drive 55 and who professes to loathe advertising, the

company's public image bristles with attitude, all never-say-die bravado and no-bullshit street credibility. A virtuoso improviser on the consumption-as-rebellion theme, Nike slam-dunks its message that rebel cool can be had for the price of a pair of Air Jordans in commercials like the controversial "Search and Destroy" spot that aired during the '96 Olympics, featuring athletes as punk-rock warriors and a bloody mouthpiece sailing across the Nike logo. *Forbes 400* approvingly notes that "by focusing its sponsorships on individual athletes" such as Charles Barkley, who notoriously declared in a Nike ad that he wasn't a role model, "Nike, despite its size, maintains its cool, outsider image."

Ironically (though hardly surprisingly), the corporate conduct behind the company's born-to-be-wild image is pure status quo: Nike has taken hits for its all-too-typical practice of relocating its manufacturing to the Third World and employing non-unionized workers at less than subsistence wages. In 1991, the owners of an Indonesian factory that manufactured Nike shoes refused to pay even the minimum wage of \$1.25 a day and called in the military to crush the ensuing strike. In a recent *New York Times* story, Knight, whose holdings have been estimated at more than \$5 billion, mouthed the laissez-faire canard that it would ruin the country's economy "if wages were allowed to get too high." According to the UAW newspaper *Solidarity*, Cicih Sukaesih, an Indonesian worker who was fired for striking, was stunned when she saw a Nike ad that exhorted, "Go ahead, demand a raise. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose." Notes Sukaesih, "They would never say that on their ads in Indonesia. When we worked in the factory, we thought 'Just Do It!' meant 'Work harder and don't question authority.'" Far from the American legions who want to Be Like Mike, the battle cry of trademarked iconoclasm sounds like an authoritarian admonition to grin and bear the corporate yoke. No pain, no gain.

Far from the sweatshop floor, among the 77 per cent of American teenage boys a "brand power survey" said would rather be wearing Nikes than any other shoes, the swoosh still stands for an "anti-authoritarian streak," an "athlete-against-the-establishment ethic," according to Donald Katz, author of *Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World*. In a revealing irony, the company synonymous with the maverick miler who runs to a different drummer has the highest levels of "acceptance of company policy ever recorded by the national firm that conducted the study," says Katz. The employees who work on the Nike World Campus, a company town shielded from the outside world by a



Disneyland-ish berm that encircles its 74-acre grounds, display a cultish devotion to the paternalistic corporation that bequeathed them a man-made lake, miles of jogging trails, the state-of-the-art Bo Jackson Fitness Center, a Joe Paterno Day Care Center for Nike tykes and, best of all, the chance to be part of what one EKIN breathlessly called “some amazing force.” And no one is more devoted than the EKINs, the technical experts out in the field whom Duke Stump describes as “the eyes and ears of the company.” It is these tattooed road warriors who spring to mind while absorbing Katz’s assertion that “the corporate ‘we’ is used in place of ‘I’ with regularity inside Nike, even as the corporate ‘we’ is lost at most other companies.” Though few, if any, illustrated youth have chosen to embellish themselves with corporate logos (to the best of my knowledge), there’s an obvious, ironic parallel between Nike’s tattooed executives and 20-something “modern primitives”: Both have transformed themselves into “walking billboards,” their “Just Do It” individuality a pastiche of symbols pilfered from the cultural memory bank. Moreover, “consumer tribalism” in youth culture – the use of brand-names as tribal totems, from Timberland to Stussy to No Fear to whatever this week’s flavor is – echoes EKIN use of the swoosh as an emblem of clan pride.

We may be standing on the threshold of the future imagined by William Gibson in the video documentary *Cyberpunk*, “a world where all of the consumers under a certain age will probably tend to identify more with their consumer status or with the products they consume than with any sort of antiquated notion of nationality.” In the Nike commercial where James Carville champions Nike baseball star Ken Griffey Jr for president, or the one where Dennis Hopper does a postmodern turn on George C. Scott’s *Patton* by delivering an over-the-top ode to football with an enormous swoosh in place of Patton’s American flag, we glimpse a tongue-in-cheek vision of a corporate-brand future brought to you by transnational capitalism. It will arrive, if it does, on the morning after the death of the nation-state so breathlessly anticipated by the laissez-faire futurists and self-styled “cyber-elite” who soapbox in *Wired*. Premonitions of it can already be discerned in the creeping corporate monoculture that the social theorist Benjamin R. Barber calls “McWorld,” a Family of Man created not by the electronic interconnectedness McLuhan extolled but by MTV, Macintosh and McDonald’s. As it approaches, McLuhan’s “retribalized” world of “electronic interdependence” looks less like a Global Village than it does Planet Reebok

We may be standing on the threshold of the future imagined by William Gibson... “a world where all of the consumers under a certain age will probably tend to identify more with their consumer status or with the products they consume than with any sort of antiquated notion of nationality.”

or NikeTown. In *Jihad Vs. McWorld: How the Planet is Both Falling Apart and Coming Together and What This Means for Democracy*, Barber argues that multinational capitalism is hell-bent on stamping “obsolete” on what Gibson would call the “antiquated notion” of the nation-state, which Barber maintains “has been democracy’s most promising host.”

In fact, “the huge leap from corporation to nation-state” has already been taken, according to the January 1997 *Wired*. In a comic-relief version of Barber’s nightmare, Cuervo Tequila recently purchased an eight-acre island in the West Indies and declared it the Republic of Cuervo Gold. Tongue firmly in cheek, the company has petitioned the UN to recognize its real-life Margaritaville as

a legitimate island nation – unsuccessfully, so far. Obviously, the creation of a corporate-sponsored Fantasy Island where the ruling party’s platform is “frozen or on the rocks” is a publicity stunt worthy of Barnum. But the secessionist stirrings among those who’ve bought a piece of what Evan McKenzie calls “Privatopia” – the gated, guarded enclaves a 1995 *New York Times* proclaimed “the fastest-growing residential communities in the nation” – are no laughing matter. Fed up with paying taxes to both local governments and the developer-controlled homeowners’ associations that are their own private governments, residents have begun to dream darkly about seceding from the towns beyond their walls. Figuratively, of course, they already have, as McKenzie points out, abandoning the cross-class, multiethnic “flux and ferment” of the city, with its “spontaneity and diversity and its unpre-

dictable rewards and hazards,” for the Privatopia of common-interest housing developments, “where master-planning, homogeneous populations, and private governments offer the affluent a chance to escape from urban reality.” In *Snow Crash*, Neal Stephenson imagines a mordantly funny near-future in which the bunker-mentality middle-class has incarcerated itself in Burbclaves, each “a city-state with its own constitution, a border, laws, cops, everything.”

It’s a worrying vision, though a science-fictional one, for now. Even so, that thought was cold comfort during a recent flight, when my eye landed on an ad for temporary “logo tattoos” in the in-flight magazine. In the photo, a smiling young woman bared her back to reveal a riot of “Easy On, Easy Off” tattoos for Volvo, Gannett, Thrifty, Toshiba and the like. Distracted by a familiar image hovering in my peripheral vision, I glanced up. A few seats away sat an athletic-looking young woman, her windbreaker proudly emblazoned with the American flag. On the patch of blue where the stars usually go was a white swoosh. —

Showcase Village
Classical House
Celebration
USA in the fabulous
Disney style.



Past Perfect

Walt Disney's vision for
the future may be coming
true in the surreal streetscapes of
Celebration, USA.

It's hardly news to any mallcrawler that the food court is our new town square, nor, to any city-dweller, that the commons is being theme-parked for mass consumption, as in Universal Studios' CityWalk – an ersatz La-La Land-cum-outdoor shopping mall, located in Universal City, that jump-cuts from Malibu to Melrose Avenue, Sunset Strip to Venice Beach in the space of a few overscaled, overdesigned blocks. Principal architect Jon Jerde insists that CityWalk, despite its po-mo Toon Town aspect, is its own “real-life place,” a *bona fide* neighborhood rather than a theme-malled Mock Angeles. Chief project designer Richard Orme extols the simulated “patina of use” – candy wrappers embedded in the flooring, for instance – that implies a lived history behind its pixilated streetscape. “People want to have a communal experience in a place that they feel safe and comfortable,” he told the *Los Angeles Times*. “Who cares if it's artificially created if it does that and answers that need?”

The corporatizing of the commons – the replacement of landmark neighborhoods by commercial simulacra (CityWalk), the usurping of Main Street's civic life by the mall, and the middle class's retreat into privately policed, strictly regulated housing developments – is becoming tolerable, even desirable, to a society struggling to reconcile a paralyzing fear of violent crime and the loss of basic services with a deep-dyed distrust of government and a fervent belief in the “free” market. This dynamic dovetails with a widespread yearning for the lost (and for many of us, largely imagined) community of an earlier America: *Our Town* minus the angst, *Huckleberry Finn* with the slave-traders and the lynch mobs left out – Disneyland's Main Street, USA, by any other name. By no accident, Disney is taking the obvious next step in the corporatizing of everyday life, an experiment in social engineering that contains the seeds of a privatized public sector – the hostile takeover of the nation-state, in the not so far future, by the multinational conglomerate.



Celebration, the planned community Disney is building near Orlando, Florida, welcomed its first residents in June, 1996; within 10 to 15 years, the 4,900-acre town will be home to a projected population of 20,000.

Celebration's residents will live in one of six neo-traditional home styles (Classical, Victorian, Colonial Revival, Coastal, Mediterranean and French) based on regional prototypes in what a promotional brochure calls America's “best and best-loved small towns,” from Charleston, South Carolina, to East Hampton, New York. If reality follows the Disney script, residents will promenade beside the town lake; take in a movie at the *faux* Deco “picture palace”; or socialize in Founders Park (“a civic space where, ultimately, neighbors might congregate after walking their children to school,” the brochure suggests, hopefully). They'll send their children to Celebration School, a K-12 facility operated by the Osceola County School Board; receive health care at Health Campus, a medical center owned and operated by Florida Hospital; and shop, bank and post their mail in downtown Celebration.

The “Architectural Walking Tour” guidebook I obtained at the on-site Preview Center calls Celebration “a traditional American town built anew... designed to offer a return to a more sociable and civic-minded way of life.” After a stroll through the downtown area, I called it Bedford Falls on Prozac. The town suggests an eerily literal realization of the Privatopias in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, Disney-esque monuments to smalltown America whose salient features include picture-perfect lawns and stately brass fire hydrants “designed on a computer screen by the same aesthetes who designed the DynaVictorian houses and the tasteful mailboxes and the immense marble street signs that sit at each intersection like headstones. Designed on a computer screen, but with an eye toward the elegance of things past and forgotten about.”

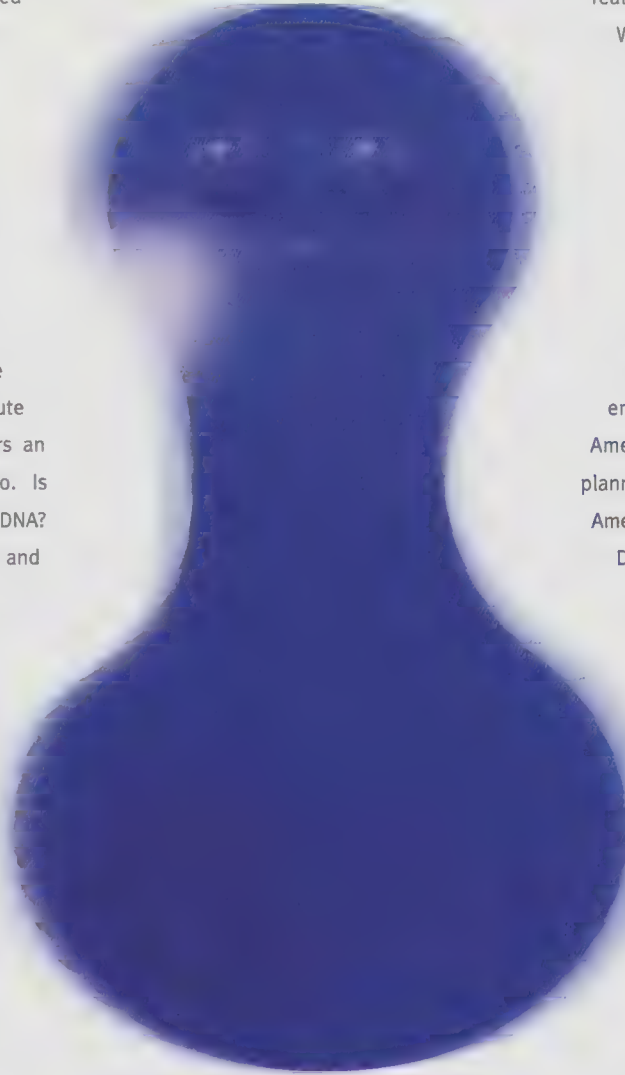
**A vague ontological
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Prisoner syndrome: the
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theme-park fakery,
stage-managed by
unseen conspirators
with dark designs. Who
will live here?**

Taking in the tasteful pastels and witty medley of architectural styles, I couldn't shake the feeling that the buildings had been scaled down, like the ones along Disneyland's Main Street, USA, where everything is built five-eighths true size to give reality a whimsical, toy-like quality. A vague ontological queasiness settled over me, a postmodern malaise I'll call the *Prisoner* syndrome: the unsettling suspicion that reality is really theme-park fakery, stage-managed by unseen conspirators with dark designs. Who will live here? The Audio-Animatronic family from GE's Carousel of Progress? A Duracell version of the Mayberry gang? Surveying the near-complete cinema, I bump into a perky young couple. He's a clean-cut, world-is-my-oyster type whose parents live in Celebration; she's a cute brunette in shorts and a bikini top who bears an unsettling resemblance to Annette Funicello. Is Disney cloning these people from Mouseketeer DNA? Scratch the surface of Disney's Frank Capra idyll and the cynical truth that Celebration is a company town – a media monolith's vision of privatized governance and democracy overruled by technocracy – lies exposed. The town's seal, a ponytailed girl riding her bike past the proverbial picket fence, a playful pup nipping at her tires, is a registered Disney trademark. Market Street, the town's "primary shopping promenade," would have been named Main Street, as in Disneyland, were it not for the fact that "there already was a Main Street in Osceola County, and street names can't be used twice," as the brochure notes, with transparent regret.

Celebration's welcome wagon will include an official history course that Celebration Foundation administrator Charles Adams described as "very similar to what we do when we bring in a new cast member to work for the Walt Disney Company." ("Cast member" is Disneyspeak for "employee.") Of course,

Celebration's only "history," to speak of, lies in the CityWalk-ish "slightly aged" look that town co-planner Jacqueline Robertson gave some of the downtown buildings, and in the houses' fastidiously historical exteriors. No matter, assures Adams: "We do have some history, really, going back to the original vision from Walt." Adams' comment points the way to the corporate agenda behind Celebration's Hollywood backlot facade. The "original vision" on which the town is based is EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow), a Jetsonian technopolis conceived by Walt in the '60s as a company town populated by Disney World employees. It was to be a brave new experiment in urban planning and social engineering, propelled by the thrusters of American technology – in Walt's words, "a planned, controlled community, a showcase for American industry and research." As realized in Disney World, EPCOT is a corporate-sponsored science fair whose obsolete tomorrows smell more pungently of mothballs with each passing year. Even so, Walt's dream lives on in EPCOT's overarching theme of corporate paternalism and technocratic solutions to social problems – the bedrock conviction "that planning for the future can be left to corporations which will 'maximize the common good,'" as Disney scholar Alan Bryman puts it.

This, the "original vision from Walt" – the belief that father knows best, be he "Uncle Walt," the self-styled "benevolent dictator of Disney enterprises," or the corporation itself as paterfamilias – is Celebration's cornerstone. Beginning with a misty-eyed evocation of childhood memories, the town's promo video promises that "there is a place that takes you back to that time of innocence. A place where the biggest decision



is whether to play kick the can or king of the hill. A place of caramel apples and cotton candy, secret forts and hopscotch on the streets. That place is here again, in a new town called Celebration.”

In Disney’s “traditional... town built anew,” residents will entrust the burdensome responsibilities of civic life in a participatory democracy to their corporate parents, just as the Disney-esque Reagan left the dreary business of governing to others, “as if government was a boring job best left to the grown-ups,” as one critic put it. An unincorporated town under the jurisdiction of Osceola County, Celebration won’t be self-governing in any meaningful sense. Disney will exercise veto power over the decisions of the homeowners’ only

Disney promises to time-warp an anxious middle class to a revisionist past (or is it a neo-traditional future?) where our corporate parents unburden us of our rights and responsibilities as citizens so that we may frolic in secret forts and hopscotch on the streets like the inner children we’ve always been at heart.

representative body, the community association, for 40 years or until three-quarters of the master-plan residences are occupied, whichever comes first. As Russ Rymer argues in his penetrating *Harper’s* essay on Celebration, Disney’s planned community is consecrated to “prevailing nostalgias for a bygone time of life, the life of a carefree child, a civic infant, when the corporation could make the rules and keep the peace, and the biggest decision left to the citizen was whether to play kick the can or king of the hill.”

In an America racked by social change and economic inequity, where community and civility are fast unraveling, Disney promises to time-warp an anxious middle class to a revisionist past (or is it a neo-traditional future?) where our corporate parents

unburden us of our rights and responsibilities as citizens so that we may frolic in secret forts and hopscotch on the streets like the inner children we’ve always been at heart. The growing appeal of the corporatized commons is evident in the fact that demand for Celebration’s initial offering of homes exceeded supply by almost three to one, despite the fact that prospective buyers had nothing to go by but models, videos and promotional literature – and the Disney name, one of the best-known, best-loved brands in the world. Rymer quotes Celebration co-planner Robert A.M. Stern: “People... almost glory in the fact that someone runs the show. People love to come to Disney because the very word ‘Disney’ means a certain authoritative standard that they will succumb to.”



Post Office,
Celebration,
USA.

If dystopian forebodings of the public sphere theme-parked by the private sector and, ultimately, participatory democracy rendered obsolete by multinational capitalism seem like neo-Marxist paranoia (as the “cyber-elite” would have it), consider Disney CEO Michael Eisner’s expressed belief that Celebration “will set up a system of how to develop communities. I hope in 50 years they say, ‘Thank God for Celebration.’” Consider, as well, the extra-legal status of Disney’s Florida fiefdom, an expanse of real estate larger than the island of Manhattan that is the workaday home of approximately 30,000 employees. In 1967, Florida officials passed legislation that granted Disney’s holdings, the inoffensively named Reedy Creek Improvement Area, the status of an autonomous county, empowered to levy its own taxes and enact its own building codes and exempt from filing environmental-impact statements or abiding by municipal or regional laws regarding development, zoning and waste control.

“Disney World is, before anything else, a governmental entity,” writes Rymer. “Walt’s greatest feat of imagineering was his vaulting of a theme park into a polity.... Because [Reedy Creek’s] powers are allowed only to popularly elected bodies, Disney instituted a ‘government’ that stayed firmly in company control; voting ‘citizens’ were a handful of loyal Disney managers. Walt’s own enmity for democratic forms was legendary.” Indeed, Walt’s original vision of Celebration, *née* EPCOT, was premised on the notion that the company would own the homes, renting them to the town’s residents: “There will be no landowners and therefore no voting control,” Walt happily declared.

Once, when asked by a journalist if he’d ever considered running for office, he replied that he had no interest in being president of the United States, remarking, “I’d rather be the benevolent dictator of Disney enterprises.” Then again, if he’d “imagineered” a future like the one envisioned by the *Spy* magazine parody in which Michael Eisner was elected president while remaining CEO of Disney, he might have reconsidered. Today, Celebration; tomorrow, the world. “When you wish upon a star....”

Photograph: © Disney Corporation



the stim

ULATI ON

Triangle

On the simulated battlefields of tomorrow, war has more in common with Disneyworld than the Pentagon.

"This idea of the indirect approach is closely related to all problems of the influence of mind upon mind – the most influential factor in human history. Yet it is hard to reconcile with another lesson: that true conclusions can only be reached, or approached, by pursuing the truth without regard to where it may lead or what its effects may be – on different interests.... In strategy, the longest way round is often the shortest way home."

– B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*



"All but war is simulation." The phrase kept popping up like a bad mantra first in the presentations with their Web-inspired graphics, then on the Nam June Paik-like wall of monitors in the Marriot Hotel's exhibition halls, and now as a banderole on an otherwise standard-issue business card. I had ambushed a colonel for a hallway interview after he finished a briefing on the virtues of virtual simulations. He handed me the card at the end of the interview, and I asked what the phrase meant. Running late, he offered a staccato history. It originated in 1992 with the activation of STRICOM (Simulation, Training and



Instrumentation Command), the newest and – as I was to find out – the most unusual command post in the military. Given the task of providing the United States Army's "vision for the future," STRICOM chose a bold motto to go with the command-post logo of a "land warrior" bisected by a lightening bolt in the middle of a bull's-eye. What the phrase means, the colonel said, is "that everything short of war is simulation." But he hastily added, "we don't *really* look at it that way, because you can't manage that properly.... When you think about it, well, it's kind of like your love life. Everything short of it is simulation."

An officer of lesser rank, someone who knew a dodgy soundbite when he heard one, cut in to remind the colonel that he had a plane to catch. I was left standing in the hallway with a frozen half-grin. What did he mean by "love life"? Who did he mean by "your" love life? Did this mean war was to simulation as love was to stimulation? Was STRICOM into some kind of William Gibson sim/stim thing? These were not the kind of questions that had originally

brought me to the 18th Interservice/Industry Training Systems and Education Conference (I/ITSEC)

In one corner of Orlando, I/ITSEC '96 was occupying the Marriot World Center for three days, with over 60 panels, 180 exhibition booths, and enough uniforms and suits to gridlock the Beltway. Gathering under one convention roof for this year's theme, "Information Technologies: The World Tomorrow," was a who's who of industry CEOs, Defense Department higher-ups, officers from the military and, not least, Tom Clancy as the banquet speaker (a no-show, as it turned out)

Forty minutes up the Central Florida Greenway, STRICOM was preparing for an award ceremony for the \$US69 million JSIMS (Joint Simulation System) contract. According to the press release, JSIMS is "a distributed computerized warfare simulation system that provides a joint synthetic battlespace... to support the 21st century warfighter's preparation for real world contingencies."

And a few miles down Orlando's International Drive, through the pink arches and under a pair of mouse ears, Disneyworld was celebrating its 25th Anniversary with a paroxysm of Imagineered (copyrighted) fun

I entered this Orlando Triangle as one might enter a paradox, where slogans like "everything but war is simulation," "prepare for war if you want peace" and the land where the fun always shines" quickly enhance the appeal of tour guides who don't rely on linear reasoning and conventional cartography. My intent was to ask a few questions, make some observations, and get in and out quick, with the help of some thinkers who well understood the seductive powers of simulations. To jump the monorails of spectacle, I borrowed from Guy

Debord the subversive power of the drift to tour a world where “everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” To counter the hazards of hyperreal simulacra, I relied on the hyperbole of Jean Baudrillard, who could well have had in mind the military-industria-entertainment complex when he warned of “a group which dreams of a miraculous correspondence of the real to their models, and therefore of an absolute manipulation.” And to avoid becoming one more casualty of “the war of images,” I planned to take seriously Paul Virilio’s advice that “winning today, whether it’s a market or a fight, is merely not losing sight of yourself.”

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that emerged from the belly of the dead dragon – a post-Cold War metaphor and prophesy of former CIA director Admiral Woolsey – had since morphed into multi-headed hydras in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Chechnya, Rwanda and other expanding pockets of the new chaos. The pride and patriotism of I/ITSEC ’91 still flared on occasion into imperial hubris and technological hype, but this year’s model was more a meld of corporate steel and glass with infotainment show-and-tell. Envisioning the future was still the goal, but enriching yourself and entertaining the stockholders en route made for a burgeoning of concessions on the way to Tomorrowland.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the war of signs itself, with the self-help vocabulary of management consultants giving the acronymic, ritualized

The problem of security, as we know, haunts our societies and long ago replaced the problem of liberty. This is not as much a moral or philosophical change as an evolution in the objective state of systems.

– Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*.

This indirect approach was prompted by my first pilgrimage to I/ITSEC five years earlier, in the wake of the Gulf War. Back then, there was a real Patriot missile in the lobby, flanked by two looped videos extolling its virtues. Many of the military still seemed to be shaking the sand out of their boots. This year, however, with the kill-ratio of the Patriot dramatically downgraded, Kurds in refugee camps in the no-fly zone, and Saddam Hussein still playing the rogue, the victorious aura of the Gulf War had somewhat faded. Moreover, the poisonous snakes

language of the military a run for its fiscal allocations. “Synergy” was the conference buzzword. Synergy between the high-flyers in the military and top players in defense industries, to make those thinner and thinner slices of the budgetary pie go that much further. Synergy in the form of alliances or outright mergers among the major defense industries. But also synergy at the advanced technological level, to imagine and engineer a new form of virtual warfare out of networked computer simulation (SIMNET) and Distributed Interactive Simulation (DIS); a command, control, communication, computer and intelligence system of systems (C4I); and complete inter-operability through a common high-level architecture (HLA). Perched at the top of this synergy pyramid was the endgame of all wargames: JSIMS, the macro, mega- meta-simulation of the 21st century. Or so they said.

When I arrived at the convention, the synergy wave was making its way through the Grand Ballroom, where the Flag and General Officer Panel was in full session. On a podium at one end of the vast room, against a projected backdrop of the American flag, multiplied and magnified by two oversized video screens, the top brass and officials from the Department of Defense presented their views on the role of information technologies for the military. Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Louis Finch warned of a return to a post-Vietnam “hollow army” if new information technologies were not harnessed “to manage a massive transition.” Vice Admiral Mazach called for a post-Cold War strategy that could deal with more-complex, multiple threats in a time of military downsizing, declaring that: “We must walk down the information highway – or be run down.” Vice Admiral Patricia Tracey endorsed the use of “infomercials” in boot camp to train troops in issues like drug and alcohol abuse as well as in new sensitive areas like gender relations: “Disney has used it for years, we’re ready to use it now.” Major General Thomas Chase of the Air Force, citing the displacement of traditional battlefields by a digitized “battlespace,” endorsed a global linking up of “synthetic environments.”

Not everyone was so eager to jump on the cyber-wagon. Wearing battle ribbons from two tours in Vietnam, and unaccompanied by snappy graphics or intricate flow charts, Major General Ray Smith of the Marine Corps took a more cautious approach to simulations. No Luddite, he acknowledged the need for new skills and training techniques for the soldier, offering the story of a lance corporal abroad, who in a single day might re-hydrate a starving child, mediate between members of warring clans, handle the media, and use a global positioning system with a satellite link-up to call in a gunship attack. Simulations, while useful, are not sufficient to train such a range of complex and compressed duties: Only experience in the field would do. When asked from the floor what industry could do to help, he paused, then bluntly said: “Make it cheap.” After the panel, I probed him for the source of his guarded skepticism. “In war you

fight people, not machines. We're training to beat computers, instead of training to beat the enemy. You cannot model the effects of confusion and surprise, the friction and fog of war."

This makes the decisive new importance of the "logistics of perception" clearer, as well as accounting for the secrecy that continues to surround it. It is a war of images and sounds, rather than objects and things, in which winning is simply a matter of not losing sight of the opposition. The will to see all, to know all, at every moment, everywhere, the will to universalized illumination: a scientific permutation on the eye of God which would forever rule out the surprise, the accident, the irruption of the unforeseen.

– Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*.

Smith's view ran against the grain of an emergent technological imperative to manage uncertainty, unpredictability and worst-case scenarios of chaos through superior simulation-power. All the major corporate players were making the pitch in force – Lockheed Martin, McDonnell Douglas, Boeing, Hughes, Evans and Sutherland, Raytheon and Northrop – along with the rising stars of the simulation business, like SAIC, Silicon Graphics, Reflectone and Viewpoint DataLabs. They had come to sell the hardware and software of the future. Human wetware was more problematic. Indulged as a consumer it otherwise took on the look of an expensive add-on, or a plug-in with compatibility problems. In most instances, the human component added a bizarre effect to the synergy mix. Consider an excerpt from one of the papers presented in the Modeling and Simulation section, called "Human Immersion into the DIS Battlefield".

Recent advances in human motion capture and head-mounted display technologies, coupled with Distributed Interactive Simulation capabilities, now allow for the implementation of an untethered, fully immersable, DIS-compliant, real-time Dismounted Soldier Simulation (DSS) System. The untethered soldier, outfitted with a set of optical markers and a wireless helmet-mounted display, can move about freely within a real-world motion-capture area, while position and orientation data are gathered and sent onto a DIS network via tracking cameras and image-processing computers....

Fortunately, for those who can't tell DIS from DSS, there was a demonstration on hand to cut through the techno-babble: The STRICOM booth was running a

looped version of the "dismounted soldier" – the "dis" saying it all about the level of respect for a grunt without wheels. Tracy Jones, lead engineer of individual-combatant simulations at STRICOM, gave me the blow-by-blow:

"We are trying to prove the principal of immersing the individual soldier in a virtual environment and having him interact with other entities in realtime. What we've got is a wireless optical-reflective marker system developed by the entertainment industry about 10 years ago in movies like *Batman* and *Aliens*. It consists of a series of four camera systems with spotlights, 16 markers on the soldier's body, and three on his M-16. These markers will pick up exactly where he is in real time and render it into a 3-D model for a virtual database. He's wearing a wireless virtual head display so he can see where he is in the virtual environment."

Lifting an edge of the camouflage netting at the back of the display, she



revealed the *deus ex machina* of DSS. "This is a MODSAF SGI station." She translated for me: "Modulated Semi-Automated Forces, Silicon Graphics Images." It was a program developed by the Army to construct computer-generated forces, because, as she put it, "you're never going to have enough men – uh, *people* – in the loop to populate a simulated battlefield, so we have computer-generated forces that are smart and intelligent, that can fight against our men in the loop." When I asked why "semi-automated," she admitted that "they're not completely smart: You can't just push a button and let them go." I was going to ask her if she knew about SKYNET and the semi-automated sentinels in *Terminator* that synergized into a very nasty Arnold Schwarzenegger. But I feared she might find that condescending.

I asked the wired soldier instead, a big guy in camouflage who looked more like Sly with a 'stache than Arnie in shades. "Isn't this getting close to the *Terminator*? Aren't you afraid of the machines getting smarter than the soldiers and taking over?" He gave me the narrow-eyed Clint look – or maybe it was just the cam-

era lights: “Uh....” Tracy intervened: “They’re not that smart yet.” Not sure who wasn’t that smart, I asked who usually wins in the simulations. No hesitation from Sly this time: “I do.” Is that programmed in? “Well, they can’t kill me. Otherwise we’d have to stop and re-start the program.” So you’re immortal? “No, I’m Rambo.” Before I can get him to elaborate on this distinction, Tracy announces that it is time to start the demonstration.

At the front of the booth I recognized the new commander of STRICOM, Brigadier General Geis, from the front cover of the recently launched magazine *Military Training and Technology*. He is surrounded by some VIPs but he agrees to a quick interview. What I get is a verbal version of the press release on the cost-effectiveness of simulations in a period of military draw-down – which is understandable, given his short tenure on the job. But after I confess to continued confusion about JSIMS, he invites me to come out to the base the next day to witness the signing ceremony of the contract award. There I could get a first-hand account from the architects and builders of JSIMS.

The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which exactly covers its territory. The very powers which escaped us show themselves to us in all their force.

– Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*.

I left the STRICOM booth and plunged into the vast exhibition hall full of simulated gunfire, flashing computer monitors and reps who varied in style from barkers at a freak show to the zen-haiku of a Nissan ad.

There were simulated cockpits of jets and helicopters, tanks and spaceships. You could fire a simulated M-16 at “terrorists” (all looking like cousins of Arafat), throw simulated grenades (you smell the post-traumatic stress with each flash-bang), tear up some turf in a simulated M1A2 tank (no German farmer to complain), take out a bad guy in a simulated drug raid (in a curious fashion-lag, the *Miami Vice* look prevails), or blow up a building with a simulated truck bomb (essential viewing for every militia member). In this electromagnetic maelstrom of simulation, patriotism and profit, I thought a seizure was more likely than synergy. I drift, heading nowhere, searching everywhere for a psychogeography that might provide a map of meaning for the sound-and-light show.

I found a familiar landmark immediately behind the STRICOM booth, where a small group of Marines was using the synergy to make simulation fun. Compared to the surroundings, theirs was a low-tech operation: Cordoned off by a black curtain, there were four monitors with keyboards, a projection screen and a sound system, all hooked up to a mini-computer. On a tight budget, and

always looking for off-the-shelf technology, the Marine Corps Modeling and Simulation Office had decided to appropriate rather than innovate, to simulate what Marines do best: to fight independently in squads with small arms. There wasn’t a smart weapon in sight, just a computer-generated four-man fire team in a re-tooled game of *Doom*. The monsters had been replaced by distant, barely visible forces that kept popping up out of foxholes and from around bunker walls to lay down some lethal fire.

I had stumbled upon *Marine Doom*: “a mental exercise in command and control in a situation of chaos.” The lieutenant wanted to know if I was ready to walk the walk. Having spent some time in the video arcade, I thought it couldn’t be too tough, especially since I would be playing with the lieutenant and two kids

barely in their teens who seemed to have acquired squatter rights. That was my first mistake. With mouse and keyboard strokes controlling speed and direction, we were to head out of our foxhole, traverse the road, go around some bunkers, and clear a building of bad guys. In eight attempts, I was killed seven times. The single time I made it all the way to the building, I killed the lieutenant in a burst of “friendly fire.” I wasn’t sure if you had to say you’re sorry in simulations, but I apologized nonetheless. The high-quality graphics, sounds of gunfire and heavy breathing, and the sight of rounds kicking up in your face, as well as the constant patter of the lieutenant (“Save your ammo. Point man, take that bunker. You’re taking rounds. I’m going up, cover

me. Ahh, I’m down!”), gave the “game” a pretty high dose of realism, especially if accelerated heart-beat is any measure.

The appropriation of *Doom* by the Marine Corps was significant for another reason. Usually, the technology transfer goes in the other direction, with military applications leading the way in research and development; from the earliest incarnations of the computer in simulation projects like Whirlwind at MIT’s Servomechanisms Laboratory during World War 2, to SAGE, the first centralized air-defense system of the Cold War, there has been a close “link” between military simulations, the development of the computer, and the entertainment industry. In 1931, the US Navy purchased the first aircraft simulator from its designer, Edward Link. By 1932, the military still had only one Link Trainer – the amusement parks had bought close to 50. Now, the developmental lag between the real thing and its simulation has just about disappeared. From the F-16 to the F-117A, the M1A2 tank to the Bradley armored vehicle, the Aegis cruiser to the latest nuclear aircraft carrier, the videogame version arrives on the shelves almost as soon as the weapon system first appears. Indeed, a Pentium chip and

**Envisioning the future
was still the goal, but
enriching yourself and
entertaining the
stockholders en route
made for a burgeoning of
concessions on the way
to Tomorrowland.**

a joystick will get you into the Comanche helicopter, the F-22 and the newest Seawolf SSN-21 submarine – which is more than a real pilot or sailor can currently claim as these projects suffer delays and budget cuts

For it is with the same Imperialism that present-day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models. But it is no longer a question of either maps or territory. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between them that was the abstraction's charm.

– Jean Baudrillard, *The Precession of Simulacra*.

My drift was interrupted by an invitation to attend a lunch laid on by Lockheed Martin. Over a catered meal in a hotel suite, Stephen Buzzard, vice-president for business development at Lockheed Martin, walked a group of journalists – mainly from the military and defense-industry journals – through a series of organization flow charts, which seemed to be in constant need of verbal revisions. Merger-mania had outstripped the capabilities of the graphics and public-relations departments. Lockheed, having barely digested Martin Marietta, added Loral in July, and Quintron in August, then reorganized 40 subsidiary companies into “virtual organizations” to “create a mix of cultures.” And, Buzzard concluded, “We have alliances with various other companies.”

With journalists and corporate executives on a first-name basis trading inside jokes, the closest thing to investigative reporting appeared to be a vying for stock tips.

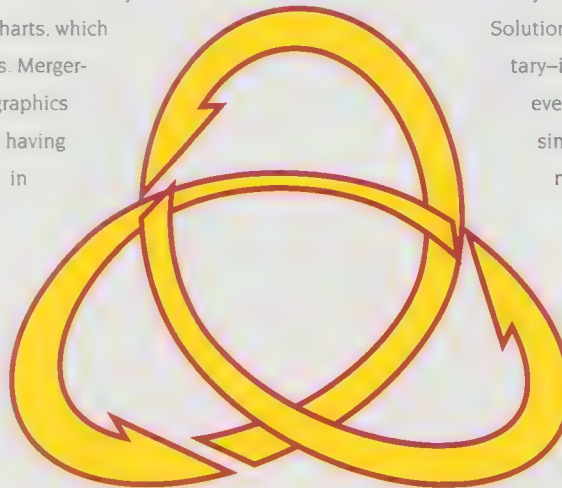
It all combined to make “synergy” a continuation of monopoly capitalism by other means – only this time the highest stage was not Lenin's vaunted imperialism but Baudrillard's hyperbolized simulation. This suspicion was supported the following week by Boeing's announcement of a \$US13 billion takeover of McDonnell Douglas, creating one more aerospace colossus.

But the smaller industries weren't waving any white flags. Silicon Graphics, for some time the David among the simulation Goliaths, had developed the most powerful slingshot yet, the Onyx2, with a memory capacity of 256 GB, memory bandwidth of 800MB/sec/CPU and, most importantly for simulation graphics, the capability to generate 20K polygons at 60HZ/pipeline. Watching one of these generate a simulation of a helicopter on the deck, down to the details of its reflections in the water and cows stopping in mid-rumination as it passes overhead, was a reality check that everyone seemed eager to cash. A hierarchy could be drawn from those booths that did and those that did not have one or

more of the sleek, black Onyx2; obviously from their placement, they were there not just to run displays but to be the display of the simulation edge. Other firms were compensating by making synergy work at the organizational level. Highly visible – and offering the best food and drink at its reception – was The Solution Group, a consortium of close to 20 industries formed by Paradigm Simulation in 1994 to integrate product, services and support for the simulation consumer. Judging from current trends one could imagine two, maybe three, enormous booths filling the hall at I/ITSEC 2000: If you're not part of the Solution, you're part of Lockheed Martin, or Boeing McDonnell. And even if there are no more enemies in sight by the year 2000, one could surmise that there would still be a Solution in search of a problem.

Niche synergy was another way to go. One member of The Solution Group was leading the way, infiltrating the military-industrial-entertainment nexus by creating an ever-expanding database of hyperreal, real-time 3-D simulations. Viewpoint DataLabs might not have high name recognition, but anyone who has viewed over the last year a commercial, a television show, a hit film, or a video-game with computer-generated graphics has probably sampled Viewpoint's product. Their booth's promo video was riveting and revealing, for the eclecticism of the content as well as the monotony of the style. It opens with the memorable scene of the alien footfighters swarming the F-18s in *Independence Day*, which buzz-cuts into a pair of attacking mosquitoes in a Cutter insect-repel-

lent commercial, then to spaceships attacking in *Star Trek Voyager*, followed by some requisite mega-explosions, a simulation of a missile launch from two helicopters, the dropping of a fuel-air dispersal bomb from *Outbreak*, and a trio of Eurofighter 2000s doing maneuvers that are aerodynamically impossible (a case of wishful flying, since the problem-plagued real Eurofighter has yet to make it into the air). Interspersed is a whimsical scene of a museum-bound *T.rex* doing a little chiropractic for a McDonald's ad and, to my émigré eye, an offensive ad of Lady Liberty plucking an Oldsmobile Aurora off the Staten Island Ferry Lady (give her your riches, your muddled mind, and she'll make the right car choice for you – that's freedom). Big Bang backed by Bang-Bang, especially when it comes in 3-D with a techno-rave soundtrack, is a big seller. That night I made the rounds of the receptions hosted mainly by the larger defense industries. I learned a lot about the field from ex-fighter jocks turned corporate VPs, ex-artists turned graphic designers, ex-hackers turned software



developers. After a few drinks, nearly everyone was eager to let me know about their former lives. I suppose making a living making machines that help stop others from living doesn't make for cocktail chatter. Nonetheless, it was there, in all the stories about what they once did. And I too was implicated, collecting data to entertain/train others in the ways of war, making war fun for the consumer/reader. I took some notes on what was being said, but I lost the cocktail napkin on which they were written

An idol capable of realizing exactly what men's faith has been unable to accomplish.... A utopia of technical fundamentalism that has nothing at all to do with the religious variety that still requires virtues of men instead of advantages to "machines"?

— Paul Virilio, afterword to *Bunker Archeology*.

The previous night was not the only reason I was late the next morning for the awards ceremony at STRICOM. I could not find the place. When you drive up to most military bases, there's a perimeter, guard booth, at the very least a recognizable headquarters with flags flying out front. Here, there were just row after row of sleek steel-and-glass buildings, interrupted by nicely landscaped parking lots. This was military base as corporate research park, with all of the major defense industries represented on the base. I finally located the right building and room, and joined a circle of dark suits and a mix of army khaki, air-force blue and navy white, standing around a large conference table. At the front, Naval Captain Drew Beasley, program manager of JSIMS, was just getting into the background of the program. It began with a Memorandum of Agreement among the leadership of the armed forces and the Department of Defense, signed in 1994, to develop "an inter-operable training simulation capable of combining warfighting doctrine; Command, Control, Communication, Computer and Intelligence (C4I); and logistics into a team event." It would replace, said Beasley, older war-games devised "for the dreaded threat of the great Russian hordes coming over the tundra." Thirty-two military operations since the end of the Cold War, ranging from famine relief to armed conflict, have demonstrated that "we need a

different paradigm that allows us to work cooperatively and jointly."

JSIMS would make it possible to combine and distribute three forms of simulations: live simulations (conducted with soldiers and equipment in "real" environments); virtual simulations (conducted with electronic and mechanical replicas of weapons systems in computer-generated scenarios); and constructive

simulations (the highest level of abstraction where computer-modeled war-games play multiple scenarios of conflict). Advances in microprocessor speed, interactive communication, and real-time, high-resolution video mean that military exercises will be able to mix and match live, virtual and constructive simulations not only in Synthetic Theaters of Wars (STOW) but also on commercially available computers and networks. Experiments have already been conducted in which a group of colonels at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas introduce an electronic OPFOR (enemy, or "opposing forces") battalion into an actual training exercise at the National Training Center in the Mojave Desert, while soldiers in Martin Marietta tank simulators at Fort Knox "ride along" in real-time with either side, as part of a distributed Battle Lab simulation. But by the year 2003, JSIMS would make it possible for "all the services to play together" with "just-in-time" mission rehearsal and "a worldwide terrain database."

With the flash of cameras and a round of applause, Captain Beasley and Lane Arbuthnot, program manager at TRW of JSIMS projects, put pen to the \$US69 million contract. A very efficient public-affairs officer had arranged an interview for me with Beasley, Arbuthnot and Kurt Simon, also from TRW, who was actually in charge of the technical aspect of building of the

simulation. The captain once more deployed his demise of the Russian-hordes metaphor to emphasize the external motivation for a new macro-simulation, but spent most of the time going over the internal factors, like the need to standardize the disparate models of the different services (some based on hex-systems, others on Cartesian coordinates) and to globalize our preparation for future threats. Sounding like a modern-day Francis Bacon ("knowledge is power"), he



made JSIMS sound as glorious as the founding of the library of Alexandria: “We are building a synthetic environment that can be used to pull down objects and representations out of our electronic libraries, objects that other services have placed there... as part of an overall streamlining process to bring a joint focus, commonality and collaboration within government and with industry.” The captain moved to a white marker board to draw a series of circles representing live and constructive simulations, which increasingly overlap as JSIMS goes through its stages of development: In his schema, the constructive had engulfed the live by the year 2003.

The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false; it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real.

– Jean Baudrillard, *The Precession of Simulacra*.



Compared to Disneyworld, the military and industry were open laptops on the role of simulations. My efforts to set up interviews with the architects of Imagineering and Audio-Animatronics (always with superscripted trademarks affixed), or better yet, to get a glimpse behind the technology of simulators like Star Tours or Body Wars, were met by some very polite, very efficient stonewalling. People were in meetings, on vacation, in California. Getting into STRICOM was a piece of cake compared to the obstacles I faced at Team Disney's po-mo headquarters. A series of abstracted mouse-ear arches, a formidable defense-in-depth of receptionists, multiple mazes of cubicles, and a sun-dial atrium that looked like a nuclear cooling tower, did not invoke a sense that this was a place where the fun always shines. When I finally reached the right cubicle, I was told that my designated handler was in a meeting. Further efforts produced meager results. After a couple of phone calls, clearance was finally reached from higher up: I was given a copy of the “25th Anniversary Press Book and Media Guide” and sent on my way.

The guide was full of noteworthy information, like the fact that Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds had a flat tire and showed up late for the 1955 opening of Disneyland and that Walt Disney did not live to see the opening of Disneyworld (but no mention that his vision of the future as a frozen past included a cryogenic funeral for himself). The chronology provided for the opening year of Disneyworld is even stranger. In the Disney version, in 1971 astronauts take the lunar buggy for a spin, George C. Scott wins an Oscar for *Patton*, 18-year-olds get the right to vote, and President Nixon fights inflation. And just about saying it all, “Everyone was wearing smile buttons,” and, “Charles Manson was convicted of murder.” Others might have different memories – President Nixon setting up the “Plumbers,” 18-year-olds drafted to fight in Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers leaked to the *New York Times*, and 31 prisoners and nine hostages killed at Attica State Prison. Simulations of the future sometimes require a re-imagineering of the past

The society signs a sort of peace treaty with its most outspoken enemies by giving them a spot in its spectacle.

– Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur* (We go around in circles in the night and are consumed by fire.)

My trip to Orlando probably yielded more anxieties than insights. If anything, STRICOM's motto, “all but war is simulation,” had taken on an even denser, fractal ambiguity. Through technical reproduction, repetition and regression, proliferations of simulation nuked any sense of an original meaning to war – or fun. Indeed, with increasing orders of verisimilitude, the simulations displayed a capability to precede and replace reality itself. Design and desire partially explain the spread of simulation. At the abstracted level of deterrence, simulations can and have worked. Total transparency through surveillance (at the airport or by satellites) combined with the occasional direct application of simulations (COPS or the Gulf War) have proven to be powerful cyber-deterrents. And it is understandable why some might desire the virtual security of simulation (JSIMS or Main Street USA) to the risks of the real (conflict overseas and crime in the cities) – even if it puts liberty as well as the reality principle at risk.

But there is an irony – and a danger – lurking at the edge of simulation, where it comes up hard against the contingencies of life. As superior computing power and networking increase its representational power and global reach, simulation leaves little room to imagine the unpredictable, the unforeseeable, the unknowable – except as accident. Will God's will, nature's caprice and human error seem puny in effect, as simulation becomes more interactive, more complex, more synergistic? In the context of industrial accidents, organizational theorists have already identified a “negative synergism” in complex systems that can produce unpredictable, worst-case failures. In the technological drive to control our environment, to deter known threats through their simulation, are we unknowingly constructing new, more catastrophic dangers?

In spite of my three days adrift in the Simulation Triangle, and the feeling that a bad case of post-simulation stress lies ahead, I still had hope for humanity. But it was sorely tested when I went to catch my flight home at the Orlando airport and saw the sign above the Delta curbside check-in: “Toy weapons must be checked at the counter.”

“In war you fight people, not machines. We're training to beat computers, instead of training to beat the enemy. You cannot model the effects of confusion and surprise, the friction and fog of war.”



TECHNOPOLITICS

Just as politics in the meat world is factionalized around issues and events, so too is Net politics. The difference is that it doesn't take multinational companies to back you.



The global Internet's awash with e-mail lists, chats and on-line conferences for discussion of governance and what goes with it: the politics of issues and personalities, trad partisan thrashes, visionary thrusts, theoretical rants and practical spins. But is this all just talk, talk, talk? Or do we see action emerging from this hash?

So far, no distinct political force or suite of positions has emerged (unless you take seriously the dreamy anarchy of techno-libertarians, who thrash about many issues but always return to one: taxation as theft). Though dedicated political activists increasingly use the Net to build organizations and share information, and a growing number of orgs and individual users are finding ways to leverage Net access, net.activism has found success on a limited playing field, where the issues are mainly constitutional – First and Fourth Amendment issues, censorship, search and seizure – issues that can be supported as absolute values requiring no partisan wrangling. The movement, as it stands today, is a rights movement, without regard to the messier political questions of welfare and health care, environment, defense, taxation and similar issues.

Contemporary politics has a forest-for-the-trees relationship with technology; in fact, the politics of a post-industrial society is itself a technology for organizing and managing those messy piles of unique, increasingly opinionated individual products of universal education and the global media wash. Though elsewhere (the Third World) dictators, unrefined jerks, still rule with brute force and terror, they're like relics, fading from the scene as the post-industrial, post-modern wash pumps through media pipes worldwide.

What happens when you funnel information into a culture where force and coercion are the key determinants of power? Force is an external, but information, education and democratization work to internalize control, making the individual responsive to sophisticated forms of communication (sign the social contract, then read the daily updates). This is a reality of the cybernetic world: "They put the control inside!" as a character in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* says. Cybernetics is the science of communication and control theory, and there's a clear theoretical link between "cyber" and "polis" that predates

the age of "a Pentium in every pot, a web in every Pentium." Broadcast media (a prototype cyberactive technology) changed the face of politics in the era following World War 2; during the war, Hitler, Roosevelt and Churchill made especially effective use of radio as a propaganda tool, and the concept of news was redefined by folks like Ed Murrow and his "boys." What does news/propaganda/agitprop do but pipe suggestive memes into the heads of individuals, with the expectation that the distribution of information will change the power equation big time. The mob reads the handwriting on the virtual wall, and opposes the dictator, whose machinations, once exposed, lose their mojo. Once you've flattened those hierarchies, though, propaganda mode can backfire, as manipulation of information replaces brute force as the source of power. After WW2, broadcasting and politics co-evolved, producing today's carefully managed media circus that dilutes information with showbiz glitz and leaves a cynical populace and an ever-widening credibility gap. The average high-school graduate has more facts and more cognitive skill than the best and brightest of a century ago, and broadcasting has morphed into narrowcasting and, with the Net, many-to-many communications that defy control by propagandists. Those who get their information from the Net have a vastly different (though not necessarily more accurate) picture of the world than those who read newspapers or watch television, or even those who listen to NPR every day while driving to and from work.

Originally an R&D network, the Net was no household word when the first seeds of net.activism were planted in the late 1980s when a few adolescent "hackers" let their digital explorations carry them to the point of intrusion, just to show that they could do it. Once they'd hacked into a system, they would grab a "trophy" and show it to their friends and rivals, which meant e-mailing it across various systems.

Just such an incident led to the creation of the seminal on-line activist organization the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). John Perry Barlow was a regular participant in discussions on the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), the BBS on which the concept of virtual community advanced beyond its realization on any of the WELL's antecedents. He had links to the hacker community, which

led the FBI to question him about the theft of Apple Computer proprietary software by the NuPrometheus League. It was clear to Barlow that the FBI did not understand enough about the technology of computers and computer networks to distinguish prank intrusion from criminal espionage, and this concerned him. Flash! Cyberspace is an electronic frontier, unsettled, poorly understood by those who don't "live" there. When the powerful misunderstanding, great harm can result. Barlow talked this through with Mitch Kapor,

founder of Lotus Development Corporation, and activist-entrepreneur John Gilmore, and EFF was born from those talks.

On-line activists focus on issues such as censorship, privacy, encryption, intellectual property and universal net access; that is, issues associated with transmission and protection of, and access to, information. Organizations and coalitions emerge *ad hoc* from hot issues of the moment, though momentum is not always sustained as issues lose their sense of urgency. Activist energies diminished, for example, after Steve Jackson won a decision against the government for illegal seizure of his computer equipment and after the Communications Decency Act (CDA) was overturned by a lower court in Philadelphia. However, activists still don't focus on the partisan model to build support. Rather than constructing elaborate philosophies and platforms, cyberactivists build networks, replacing belief systems with cycles of information and opinion.

Given the brevity of the history of net.activism, it's hard to draw conclusions about potential long-term efficacy and feasibility of a broader appeal. Consider the barriers to entry, not only for the activists themselves but for their constituents. Moving to the Net with a sense of purpose requires a commitment of money (for the technology) and time (for the learning curve and ongoing maintenance of the information flow). "Netizens" are inherently members of an elite group – well educated, with discretionary money and discretionary time. Some have decent incomes, others are students with decent potential incomes... but it's not a large group, compared to traditional political parties. Traditional politicians don't get the smell of cash from the Internet just yet, and many of the issues of relevance to Net activists are considered fringe

issues. Cyberactivists have yet to establish focused and well-financed ("real") political clout, and have been unable to influence legislative initiatives in major ways.

But what we call "technopolitics" or "net.activism" is not about politics-as-usual and is not a short-term blip on the radar of political evolution. A focus on core civil-liberties issues narrows the scope of netizen activity so that consensus is possible among those with diverse political positions. On the net.politics scene, we see broad-based coalitions formed *ad hoc* with minimal partisan wrangling and little reference to any particular agenda other than constitutional integrity.

When Senator Jim Exon and friends proposed a bill to squelch "indecent" speech on the Net, opposition to the bill was initially unfocused, but it had the advantage of established paths through electronic networks to spread the word, the warning, of Exon's proposal. Activists thought the bill was dead until it was glommed onto the Omnibus Telecommunications Act (OTA) as a rider, a political trick that called for quick response. Shabbir Safdar and Steven Cherry of Voters Telecommunication Watch (VTW) organized an on-line campaign with just the focus and energy that urgent issues demand. The Center for Democracy and Technology and EFF joined in, too. They didn't succeed in blocking passage of the CDA, but the thousands of phone calls and letters to legislators that resulted from VTW's bulletins led to some revisions and psyched the American Civil Liberties Union and other opponents of the bill, leading to a court challenge fought successfully by a coalition of activists and civil-liberties organizations. The bill was overturned, but that decision has been appealed to the US Supreme Court. However, as Mike Godwin has noted, the findings of fact in the lower-court decision, informed as it was by highly effective opposition arguments (assembled with substantial on-line support), make it difficult for the Supreme Court to reverse.

When VTW e-mailed bulletins to its e-mail list, those bulletins were retransmitted to others who again retransmitted them, so that the CDA updates were reaching many thousands of netizens. A political force was building, *ad hoc*, and the campaign was so successful that opposition to the CDA seemed near-universal among Internet users. If there were on-line critics of VTW's campaign, they found fault only with the lack of focus on other potential problems within the Omnibus Telecommunications Act. However, many opponents of the

Once you've flattened those hierarchies, though, propaganda mode can backfire, as manipulation of information replaces brute force as the source of power. After WW2, broadcasting and politics co-evolved, producing today's carefully managed media circus that dilutes information with showbiz glitz and leaves a cynical populace and an ever-widening credibility gap.



CDA found the OTA otherwise acceptable, if not desirable; VTW showed smarts in keeping the message focused on the issue about which broad agreement was possible.

This *ad hoc* opposition to the CDA demonstrated the potential of on-line organizations to build powerful groups around particular issues. This kind of networking is not new, but computer-mediated communications greatly enhance the speed and effectiveness of networking. There is a sense that decisions could be made so fast within global on-line communities, that legislatures and executives will always lag, and will eventually be considered archaic. It's the virtual equivalent of taking the power to the streets, creating either more-effective democracy (if you listen to the angel on your right shoulder) or inchoate mob rule (if you listen to the devil on your left).

Partisan politics reflects the government's hierarchical structure: Parties, like nations and states, have leaders, committees, hierarchical bureaucratic structures, and set articles or principles to which members of the party (or subscribers to the doctrine) must adhere. Computer-mediated chaos politics is way different: There are no established parties, no hierarchical structures, no established principles; groups form around particular issues, but group members may agree with each other only about this one issue.

This isn't new. Traditional politics emerges from the same tendency to form constituencies around issues; partisan politics hardwires these constituencies and holds them together from election to election, hoping to have the winning numbers. Participation in partisan politics is still limited; no party has the numbers to win an election. Political parties build and sustain power by playing to the "great silent majorities" of the world, appealing and winning votes on focused, carefully researched issues, with more or less charismatic personalities fronting the elections.

With computer-mediated, relatively instantaneous communications, you can toss this institutional approach. Netizens respond in blocs to particular issues but are increasingly reluctant to join parties or vote along party lines. Techno-libertarians, particularly, share this mindset. Libertarian thinking is widespread in virtual communities on the Internet, its proponents voluble in their opposition to the complexity, intrusiveness and evident inefficiency of big government. Libertarians are at the edge of a movement to dismantle government bureaucracies and decentralize governance wherever possible. This resonates with the tendency to move away from established, monolithic political parties. Even the big-L Libertarian party has difficulty recruiting small-l libertarians.

Netizen, libertarian and cyberactivist orgs are not going to replace party politics in the near future, but given the mood of cynicism and the growing opposition to large institutional approaches to damn near anything, and you wonder whether this is the handwriting on the wall for political organizations worldwide.

Initially misunderstood as a "hacker defense fund," EFF evolved from a grassroots activist organization strongly influenced by first-hire staff counsel Mike Godwin, to the addition of a Washington, D.C. office directed by former American Civil Liberties Union activist Jerry Berman in 1992, and extended to the hiring of Cliff Figallo soon thereafter as grassroots-oriented national director. Then the grassroots EFF morphed, as the Washington office took precedence. For a time, EFF tried to accommodate two approaches to activism – the grassroots model, from their Cambridge office; and the Washington lobby model, from their D.C. office – with some hope that the two could derive strength from each other. However, at a facilitated retreat in 1993, just before a meeting in Atlanta with potential EFF chapters, the group decided to focus on lobbying, legal work and building industry coalitions. The organization would drop the chapters approach and close the Cambridge office.

The D.C./Beltway version of EFF lasted until 1994, when financial and personnel problems, along with flak from the activist community over support for compromise digital telephony legislation, led to a split. Jerry Berman formed his own Center for Democracy and Technology; EFF moved to the Bay Area and continues to work effectively as an activist organization, considering a possible return to grassroots development, but focusing primarily on development of a Silicon Valley pro-user response on issues such as privacy, access and free expression. This is market-oriented political activism, convincing the Silicon Valley companies that their markets depend on a free and open cyberspace. EFF has retired its debts, and its funding problems, while not wholly resolved, seem to be diminishing, partly due to the fundraising efforts of current executive director Lori Fena.

Under EFF's influence, several influential cyberactivist groups have emerged. "Electronic Frontiers" groups span the globe: The first, EFF-Austin, was formed as a potential alpha chapter as EFF was involved in Austin-based Steve Jackson Games' successful suit against the federal government. Other EFF groups include EF-Australia, EF-Canada, EF-Florida, EF-Georgia, EF-Houston, EF-Ireland, EF-Italy, EF-Japan, EF-KIO (Kentucky, Indiana, Idaho), EF-New Hampshire, EF-Norway and EF-Spain, in addition to CDT and its spinoff CIEC (the Citizens' Internet Empowerment Coalition), VTW (Voters Telecommunication Watch) and New York's SEA (Society for Electronic Access), which was originally named NTE for "Not the EFF."




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With the end of the Cold War meeting the beginning of the Information Age, data between East and West takes on a new strategic meaning.

@ **Potsdam, a town near Berlin,** is famous to most people for only one thing: It's the place where the Russians, the Americans and the British met in July 1945 to issue the Potsdam Declaration calling for the unconditional surrender of Japan. It's where Harry Truman casually informed Stalin that the Americans had a "new weapon," and was greatly relieved when the dictator didn't press him for details. When the Japanese refused to surrender, the world discovered just what that weapon was. At Potsdam, allied policies on a lot of things, not least the German occupation and the fate of former Axis colonies, started unraveling. It's as good a time and place as any to nominate as the moment the Cold War began. And it was an apt location for Tom Keenan and Tom Levin to host a conference called Data Conflicts, on Eastern Europe and the geopolitics of cyberspace.

Potsdam does have one other thing going for it – a little outfit called the Einstein Forum. Headed by Gary Smith, an authority on the work of Walter Benjamin, the forum is part of the cultural apparatus of the state of Brandenburg, and is named after Einstein because his summer house is there. Between them, Gary Smith and the "two Toms" had hit on a formula for putting Potsdam back on the map – at least, on the map known to those people around the world who think about the politics of the way places come to have meaning, to signify more than a mere dot on the grid.

Keenan and Levin are both Princeton academics who match Ivy League cultural sophistication with a lively interest in contemporary media. Levin translated the German critic Siegfried Kracauer's classic essays, known as *The Mass Ornament*, into English. Keenan has written some very perceptive essays on the media coverage of the post-Potsdam American empire's latest adventures, in the Gulf, Somalia and the Balkans. What made Data Conflicts a memorable weekend was the eclectic range of media theorists, peace-movement activists, war correspondents and Internet radicals they brought together.

Here's a story: Tired of watching Americans strutting around like they owned the place, some Somali hot-heads decided to get even. That they lacked helicopter gunships and other hi-tech tools of urban terror didn't phase them. They just nabbed an American, killed him, and dragged him through the streets. But they

made sure the cameras caught it and broadcast it all around the world. It's pretty much impossible for anyone in the First World to imagine just how that plays in the Third World. What the Somali did, according to Keenan, was use the video camera as a "virtual weapon." Overlaid on top of the geopolitics of missiles, tanks and gunships is the other geopolitics that's been so familiar since the days of the Potsdam Declaration, a geopolitics of what the Pentagon calls command, control, communication and intelligence – not to mention propaganda.

Keenan pointed out that, as New York-based cultural commentator Andrew Ross says, critical thinking can get a bit obsessed with the media, neglecting some pretty hard-core realities that have not simply gone away, such as the state. But if there's one thing Data Conflicts made pretty clear, it's that questions of state power and media power are always very closely related.

Robert Horvitz, a Prague-based journalist presently working for one of the Soros Foundation's many initiatives in Europe, and with a lot of experience with news gathering in the East since the fall of the Stalinist states, had a very good example. While there is rapid growth of the Net in some Eastern European countries, they are getting wired up to the West rather than to each other. Data moving between Budapest and Prague, for example, is most likely moving via Amsterdam. He identified a series of key conflicts: conflict between government control and the free flow of information; conflict between the state-owned telecommunications monopolies and private communications businesses; the shakeout in the marketplace that is consolidating ownership of media assets in fewer hands; conflict over access caused by rising congestion in available bandwidth; conflicts over tariff structures between the old model of pricing based on distance and border crossings and newer models based on kilobytes of data moved. The rise of Net-based technologies also puts a new twist on conflicts over language and alphabets, and between what Horvitz calls "cosmopolitan" and "tribal" notions of identity.

For all that, he thinks there are common experiences in Eastern Europe, such as the impact of globalizing trade opening up new opportunities. All of the East is now experiencing the pervasiveness of American influence in the media first

hand. Horvitz thinks the Net is accelerating education in the East, and sometimes performs the function, previously carried out by the state bureaucracy, of keeping people seemingly employed. The East is also coming on-line right at the moment when there are major issues being negotiated at the international level on the intellectual-property issues associated with the world's data going digital: treaties on rights in artistic work, audio performance rights, intellectual property, database copyright and fair use.

Horvitz laid out some of the most significant kinds of peaceful data conflict facing the new Europe. But if, as Clauswitz said, politics is war by other means, then

The rusty old Stalinist state wasn't good at many things, but it did have a comparative advantage in science and the secret police. The latter are carving out a place for themselves in the new order by going into the business of news production. If you can't control the news media, you might as well produce it.

to agencies like the KGB, the Net looks like intelligence by other means. Masha Gessen, a Moscow-based journalist, asked the intriguing question of what happens when Russian intelligence is confronted by the Net. The rusty old Stalinist state wasn't good at many things, but it did have a comparative advantage in science and the secret police. The latter are carving out a place for themselves in the new order by going into the business of news production. If you can't control the news media, you might as well produce it. They have also gone into the business of data security: Who better to protect your data than the people who know the most about how to steal it?

Tamas Bodoky, a Hungarian new-media journalist, gave a nice snapshot of how things had changed by invoking the image of the old Hungarian opposition hiding printing presses in their summer houses. But, he asked, what

was the decisive force for social change in the end? Samizdat or satellite TV? The internal opposition or the flow of images from the outside world? I wonder if the time will come soon enough to reassess those judgments. As the late Gilles Deleuze used to say, change takes place along fault lines that start as tiny cracks and that nobody sees coming. Maybe, as Andrew Ross has also suggested, we're missing the real crack in history by making such a big deal about the media.

Still, Bodoky tells a great story. In a country ruled by what he calls "soft censorship," where you had to get permission to use a photocopier, computer gear smuggled in from the West was a valuable tool. Informal circles started up swapping information and software via modem. This gave way to good old FidoNet, a fantastic tool through which networks of PCs ship data to each other – a street-level hacker's version of the Net.

Bodoky told a curious story about Microsoft in Hungary – the kind of thing the mainstream computer press in the West doesn't talk about. The culture of the computer underground from the old days carried over the tradition of software piracy into the post-Stalinist era. Hungarians think it's pretty funny that there is allegedly only one copy of Windows licensed in the whole of Hungary. Microsoft was quite rightly pissed off about this, and cooperated with the government in a campaign against piracy that encouraged people to call a widely advertised number and inform on pirates. The unfortunate side effect for Microsoft is the public-relations disaster of being associated with tactics that remind people of the Stalinist secret police and its "informer culture."

By the end of the first session of Data Conflicts, we'd moved from Keenan's invocation of the video camera as a virtual weapon to whole virtual political-economy data flows organizing themselves within and across the old borders, as well as a host of formerly state structures reinventing themselves to take advantage of the new vectors from East to West along which money and information might flow. But while the Eastern European story is largely one of data conflicts, the former Yugoslavia is another story.

Frank Tiggelaar strikes you as one of those guys who just can't help helping people. He talked about setting up pages on the Web for both Bosnians and Croatians – in Holland. As he reminded us, there's now a vast refugee and migrant population from the Balkans that resides in many countries. These very popular Web pages provide a useful resource for people trying to keep track of relatives and to maintain a sense of culture in the diaspora. The Net is now one of the prime tools of choice for people on limited means who need to keep communicating in the wake of violent conflicts.

Two legendary figures graced the Data Conflicts conference: Wam Kat and Eric Bachman, both of whom are deeply involved in connecting the peace movement in the Balkans with the Net. Bachman is sysop for ZaMir Transnational Net, which operates in several cities – and several countries – in the former Yugoslavia. Using any data link it can get, ZaMir shuttles information from one side of the conflict to the other, in the hope that grass-roots communication can be a counterforce of sorts to fascist and militarist propaganda. Or if not, then at least a way for people to find out if their friends and relatives on the other side of a battle zone are still alive, and to feel connected to the outside world.

A former media-studies scholar turned feral peace activist, Kat is famous around the world for his diaries, in which he wrote down his experiences working in the peace movement in the Balkans. I asked him why it was that he came to devote himself to hanging out in war zones, pitching in to rebuild communities, cultures, communication. He said it might have something to do with being Dutch. "You know, the Dutch, we had a bad empire, but it made us aware of the world. Now we imagine working as a good empire," he jokes. But then he adds, "it might also

have something to do with being Jewish. My parents survived the Holocaust.” Quite another kind of Balkans story came from Jim Bartlett and Michael Linder. Bartlett is a former army engineer turned war correspondent. Linder is a former TV producer turned Web entrepreneur. What brought them together was a remarkable little experiment in on-line media called Berzerkistan, which tried for a while to be hard-core current affairs on the Web. It’s no longer running, but the pages are still up and worth checking out. In the Web format, Bartlett was able to offer something a bit more interesting than the 30-second coverage international stories get on CNN. Had the project succeeded, Linder aimed to send reporters into other war zones – next on the list was the Burmese border.

“A chill has settled over the Internet,” Linder said. For all the hype, practically nobody is investing in services. The media conglomerates have looked at the projections and got cold feet. All except Microsoft, who cheerfully poured \$400 million into content in 1996. That’s more than all four American TV networks spent on their fall TV schedules. Linder says he approached Microsoft with his Berzerkistan project, only to be told that Microsoft weren’t interested in independent news production because they had a partnership with the broadcaster NBC. Linder’s point is that this will sooner or later affect everybody looking for investment money for Web-content creation. The big media conglomerates – Disney/ABC, News Corp, Turner/TimeWarner – will control news content on the Net, and they will treat it much the same way they treat any other media property. For all the hype about information wanting to be free, and the glorious cyberlibertarian future of the Net combined with the market, the oligopolies are moving in.

Linder is not exactly an amateur at content creation. He was behind the popular TV show *America’s Most Wanted*. He’s the kind of person who has ideas you’d just love to see get made. For example: the *Jesse Jackson Show*. The pilot for this involved the charismatic black presidential candidate flying to Bagdad after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to negotiate – successfully – for the release of hostages. That made the NBC news, but the show was too hot for the Networks. What’s depressing about this is that, whereas the Jackson show failed to get up on Network TV, you would expect Berzerkistan to at least get a look in on the allegedly more diversified Web. That it didn’t ought to ring a little alarm bell somewhere, as conflicts over diversity of news and opinion in broadcasting are already becoming Net issues too. It’s one thing for amateurs to be able to put up Web pages

showing anything from their pet dog to their pet beef to their girlfriend’s used underpants, but in terms of properly funded content, the oligopoly structure may be cementing itself in place right now.

Pit Schultz would have to be the most low-key conference presenter I’ve ever seen. In contrast to a born showman like Linder, he spoke so softly you hardly knew he was there at all. And all he said was: A bunch of people who came out of the urban struggles of the late ’70s and ’80s, and a bunch of people involved in avant-garde media art, together with a few media theorists and techno geeks, have started a movement. It’s most obvious manifestation is a Website and list-server called Nettime, on which, in an average week, you might read

four or five lengthy, considered, (mostly) polite posts critiquing Californian cyber-ideology, or advancing a new approach to digital aesthetics, or hashing out the imperial role of English as a language on the Net. Nettime is the tip of a very European iceberg – a reforming, and reformulation, of what European intellectuals do best of all: the formation of thoughtful radicalism, of an avant-garde that combines aesthetics, ethics and politics. Forget about the Surrealists, or the Situationists or the post-structuralists – the movement of the moment is Nettime. In the Net, that traditional, almost sacred European institution of the radical intellectual avant-garde has perhaps found the tool it’s been dreaming of for generations. If Michael Linder has a good product frustrated by the commercial process, Nettime is a great process designed to perplex the commercial product the Net is

becoming.

In Potsdam, soaking up the ambience of German critical media thinking, I realize that, whereas in the English-speaking world the postmodern moment was just another bump in the highway, for central Europeans, properly trained in the tradition that runs from Kant to Heidegger, it’s a full-on highway pile-up that everyone is still mourning. Frank Hartmann gave a good account of that moment of crisis. He’s the author of a book called *Cyber.Philosophy*, and notorious in his native Austria for an earlier book in which he outed the Nazi past of the still-dominant philosophical establishment.

The impression one gets from listening to Hartmann is that there’s a part of the European intellectual soul that’s still locked into the idea of itself created by Immanuel Kant. There is the world of “things in themselves,” about which we can really know nothing, and there is the world of our perceptions of things, which is



always limited by a particular point of view and is, more often than not, mistaken anyway. The mission of critical thinking is to find the proper limits to what we can know about the things we perceive, so that we might know also how we ought to act and for what we can hope.

There's also a history that runs from Kant to Heidegger, in which thinkers criticise previous attempts to spell out how critical thinking is supposed to work and how it grounds itself. But from there it loses its confidence, and starts to question its own abilities. From Heidegger to Derrida, questioning whether philosophy can work at all becomes the main event and this credibility crisis reverberates through the whole intellectual landscape – at least in philosophy's heartland, Europe.

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ments like deconstruction have undone the old way of being a critical intellectual in Europe – but without really providing an alternative in this moment of conflict and change.

Boris Buden, a very perceptive Croatian writer now living in Austria, gave what was in many ways the stand-out paper of the conference, because it brought home the connection between the intellectual crisis in European thought and the geopolitical crisis in the Balkans. He did so by looking at what it meant that three prominent intellectuals had gone to the Balkans – German novelist Peter Handke, French pop philosopher Alan Finkelkraut, and American critic and “honorary European” Susan Sontag. In all three cases, Buden says, the intellectual move is the same – to ground the critique of the media quite simply in terms of the intellectual’s physical proximity to the war. The “realness” of the war can then play against the simulacra of the media – and in the process reinvigorate the intellectual’s standing in competition with the media. And in competition also with figures who might use the media quite differently, like Jesse Jackson.

In the Net, that traditional, almost sacred European institution of the radical intellectual avant-garde has perhaps found the tool it's been dreaming of for generations.

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"The war zone," says Buden, "becomes a 'reality park' for the intellectual." Buden sees it as a last gasp for the prestige of European intellectuals, undermined by the collapse of the self-confidence of philosophy on one side, and by the pervasiveness of the media in everyday life on the other. Buden sees Handke, Finkelkraut and Sontag as trying to answer Jean Baudrillard's provocative statement that "the Gulf War did not take place" – his point being that the "war" as we know it is only a media simulation, detached from events. The answer to Baudrillard was to go there and pose next to the holes blasted by the mortar rounds and insist on how real they are – and get coverage in the media. Buden's preferred strategy would be something like a popular media form of deconstruction itself – showing how the gaps and breaks in the media's simulation of events reveal the difference between the media's perceptions and the unknowable side of the media itself – something more like what might be happening among the Nettime people – a fresh start on the project of an intellectual practice in and on the media. One that is positive rather than critical. One that doesn't try to ground itself in a superior claim to know and hence to criticize the false. Rather, an intellectual practice that produces ever different ways of thinking and acting through media.

The keynote speaker at Data Conflicts is a giant of European media studies but less well-known in the English-speaking world – Friedrich Kittler. His first book, *Discourse Networks*, is available in English. Some later essays are also coming out soon, titled *Literature, Media, Information Systems*. The latter title maps his whole trajectory; literature professor, to critical studies of the media, to something very strange indeed.

Kittler's way of getting around an inability to ground critical thinking about the content of media was to look instead at hardware. His paper for Data Conflicts was an immensely erudite excavation of the intellectual roots of the digital hard-

ware world, including Alan Turing and John von Neumann. I asked him why he was thinking about the roots of the military-industrial complex, when it seems now to have become something else – the military-entertainment complex. "Why ask a German that?" he countered. "We get all the movies late and don't understand them anyway."

As the original Nettimer, Geert Lovink, once said, to Europeans the media is not just a technology or a business, but a metaphysical idea. It's where the dream of reason and civility has rested since the Enlightenment. The fact that people in a country as rich and powerful as Germany seem in lots of ways deeply uneasy about their future in the data conflicts to come ought to be deeply disturbing to less well-resourced Eastern Europeans, and to small or poor countries everywhere. There is every sign of a richly ambivalent relationship to Western, particularly American, media, even in countries otherwise highly relieved to be edging towards the Western camp, such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

Wolfgang Ernst gave a remarkable summary of the structures of Russian archives. "Archives," he said, "mirror the structure of power." Document management in Russia was thus exclusively bound to the idea of the state. This impeded the development of information theory. But it had its funny side. When Gorbachev ordered the destruction of archives relating to the murder of Polish officers during the war, archivists refused, on the grounds that, even if they destroyed that archive, they would still have to archive the order to destroy the archive. A paradox of which Jorge Luis Borges would be proud. Ernst was very concerned for "the future of world memory" about the deals being done by institutions like the Hoover Institute to exchange up-to-date American data technology for exclusive access to old Cold War documents. Not even the past, it seems, is safe from data conflicts.



Data Conflicts homepage, and links: <http://ppc.princeton.edu/idealab/datacon/>
<http://www.quintessenz.at/DataConflicts>

Frank Hartman's Site: <http://www.xs4all.nl/~frankti/indexeng.html>

Croatia and Bosnia Information Pages Europe (CBIPE): <http://www.xs4all.nl/~frankti/indexeng.html>

Berzerkistan: <http://linder.com/berserk/berserk.html>

ZaMir Transnational Net: <http://pax.euNet.ch/Sarajevo/zamir.html>

Wam Kat's Zagreb Diary: http://www.foebud.org/texte/wam_kat/



Gross Net Product

The development of the Net's latest software has led to an inevitable similarity to the commercial aspects of television.



One night three years ago, I kicked TV, just like that. The ambient hum of late-night talk shows and *Cheers* re-runs had become almost necessary for me to do my work, and that scared the hell out of me. As all addictions do, TV was also screwing me up – actually making it harder and harder to concentrate on other things, even while it was (so it seemed) soothing me. Except to watch rented movies, I never turned my television on again.

Apart from the additional late-night time I now had for reading, writing or talking on the phone with friends, I noticed another change. As my memory of TV-watching faded, the television eventually ceased to exist as an option. I realized, in retrospect, how automatic it had been for me to reach for the set as soon as I got home or sat down at the computer. Sometimes I'd even treated it as a kind of reward when I'd finished some writing or other grueling work. Now I'd gotten over the hump, and it never came to mind as a possibility any more. No moralism or anti-TV crusades – I just had better things to do. Good riddance to bad trash, as they say.

All these sensations came flooding back to me when I started using Pointcast. A friend told me about the new software program shortly after it was released: It was a cutting-edge technology, a new paradigm, different from anything else on the Net. All you had to do was set up a profile specifying the kind of information and news you were interested in, the city you lived in, the ticker symbols of your stock portfolio, and Pointcast would “broadcast” news, weather and stock quotes to your computer. Unlike the mostly static pages of the World Wide Web, Pointcast danced across your screen, with real-time sports scores, financial data and even the winning lottery numbers for your state. The TV metaphor was obvious, and no secret. Unlike the “pull” model that had dominated the Net to that point, Pointcast used “push” technology – rather than having to point, click and type to find what you wanted, you just sat back and let Pointcast deliver it to your PC. There were even several “channels” you could tune to.

It didn't take long for Pointcast to become the latest techno-darling of the wired world. Front-page articles in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*

trumpeted it as the next big thing and declared that it was turning the World Wide Web “on its head.” Neither of these claims was an exaggeration. But in addition to representing the Net's long-awaited next technological shift, it answered the other Net-related question that was on everyone's lips: How are we going to make money off this thing already? The answer: With ads, of course. Not those boring “banner” ads at the top of the Yahoo! homepage (and how much would advertisers pay for them anyway?); not those obnoxious “click-through” ad pages that piss Web-surfers off by withholding content for an additional 30 seconds. No, *real* ads, with animation, and maybe even precise consumer-targeting based on individual tastes.

But back to my story. No sooner had I downloaded the Pointcast software and given it a whirl than I noticed an old pattern re-emerging: I got home the next evening, dialed my Internet provider to read the day's e-mail as usual, and then – dove into Pointcast, thinking “Hey, let's see what's on!” TV, indeed: I leaned back in my chair, waited for the day's news, weather and business data to load up, and next thing I knew, found myself flipping back and forth through the channels in a semi-daze for an hour and a half. Damn – old habits are hard to break....

What was, predictably, far more enticing than Pointcast's “programming” – a handful of weather maps, bare-bones news stories from Reuters, and 10-week stock-price graphs – was the *ads*.

Following a pattern established long ago on TV, the production values of Pointcast's “official” content were blatantly inferior to those of the advertisements (the “real” content). In fact, Pointcast's production-values gap was far larger than TV's: Even the scrolling weather maps and satellite photos couldn't begin to touch the high-end graphic design and flashiness of the animated “commercials.” Worse still, instead of subjecting the viewer to a word from its sponsor every eight minutes, Pointcast ran commercials *at all times* in one corner of the screen, providing a constant advertising assault. At some time in history there may have been another medium that broadcast advertising simul-



taneously with content, and with not a moment's break, but none comes to mind.

Besides its claim to being the rightful heir to the evil tube, Pointcast also represents a change for the worse in the development of the Internet. What started out as an almost 100 per cent interactive, many-to-many medium has been moving more toward a read-only or broadcast model for some time now, and Pointcast may signal the beginning of the end at last. With the impending death of Usenet, a free-for-all forum that has simultaneously grown out of control and disintegrated (too many people,

too many jerks, no noise-control), and the rise of the primarily one-way World Wide Web, the Net was on its way to becoming a consumer product anyway. Has the other shoe finally dropped?

Hakim Bey doesn't quite think so. "The Net is becoming a Home Shopping Network, the way it was always fated to be," he says. "That's been clear for some time now. It's not the end of the world, just another medium taken over by corporate capital." Steven Kurtz of the Critical Art Ensemble, on the other hand, wonders whether the Net was ever all it was cracked up to be: "The computer is one of the great tools of separation ever; it's worse than TV in this way. It's designed for one person to look at one screen by himself. With TV, at least you're collectively in one place. With the computer, you sit in your room by yourself." So what happens when the computer is

cross-bred with TV – the ads, the 30-second capsule stories, the narcotic tractor beam that I'd finally managed to escape?

Kurtz is no knee-jerk Luddite. He freely acknowledges that "the Net is great for personal information, storing information, retrieving information – fantastic for that." But, he hastens to add, "once you cross that line, you're into nightmare land." He agrees that the Net seemed to have great utopian possibilities early on, but thinks that they were largely illusory, and in any event temporary. Those lucky enough to be in on it at the beginning benefitted from the fact that as a tool of "pan-capitalism" it was still being tested, and hence was relatively unpoliced.

"...It's often been said that the Earth really is flat, and the sun goes around it, because that's the way the body experiences it. So, the computer and TV are the same thing because the body experiences them as the same thing, and did from the beginning. PCs were jacked up to a screen from the start. If you were an alien from another planet, it would be obvious, because they've even got the same shape."



"You have to give up some social control to do fiscal experimentation," he says. "There's going to be some chaos that comes with that." Now, however, as it becomes clear what the Net is most useful for (better-targeted advertising, and more-efficient global marketing and selling), there'll be more of a focus on that and less tolerance of anyone standing in the way. "Things that undermine pan-capitalism will be censored, access will be limited," Kurtz says. "The indicators are already there: They're trying to figure out how to censor certain information, using child pornography to do test research. Information about how to make weaponry and bombs has to be eliminated. There are new legislative questions...."

None of this should be any surprise, in Kurtz's opinion: "People think that the Net lives in a vacuum, but it's structured around pan-capitalism and serves its needs; things that don't fit are filtered out, and the Web and the Net are no exception. People once thought that *train tracks* were going to make for a new world community, but they're just part of the capitalist infrastructure."

As are ads and, for that matter, oligopolistic control of information flow. Already, hordes of small "inefficient" Net-content providers are dropping like flies, leading quite possibly to the consolidation of the market in the hands of a few deep-pocketed media conglomerates – which is where we came in. Could it be that, after the smoke clears, the Net will have done little more than help TV evolve? Bey believes that, after all, there isn't much difference between the two anyway: "It's always been just a screen," he says. "The screen has always been central. The situation is the same for the TV watcher and computer user, except supposedly the interaction. It's often been said that the Earth really is flat, and the sun goes around it, because that's the way the body experiences it. So, the computer and TV are the same thing because the body experiences them as the

same thing, and did from the beginning. PCs were jacked up to a screen from the start. If you were an alien from another planet, it would be obvious, because they've even got the same *shape*."

If nothing else, though, there is one important difference between TV and the Net: the Net is *hackable*. It's an open rather than closed box – one with plenty of useful information and valuable resources – and poking around inside it can produce some interesting results. There's no denying the fundamentally uncontrollable nature of the Net, which has survived years of attempts at legislation, threats and lawsuits. Can it ever be *completely* dominated by salesmen, governments and police agencies? Doubtful – they'll try, but that early period of experimentation was more than enough time for a vast number of alleyways, trap-doors and safe zones to be set up; most people won't know or care about them, but they'll be there. Nevertheless, in five years time the average Net surfer will probably look an awful lot like today's spellbound TV watcher, and the Net will be, for the most part, what it was destined to be from the beginning.


So what about the much-touted non-hierarchical utopia we were promised, the hacker outlaw's paradise, the land of uncrackable cryptography, untaxable cyber-cash transactions and unregulatable digital contraband? Will it all be somehow paved to make way for a worldwide TV studio? Bey answers with a metaphor, a story about the Ben Ishmael tribe:

"They were a mixed Black/White/Indian group who escaped from Kentucky, a slave state, to what became Ohio. Eventually, the city of Cincinnati grew up around their encampment, so that the ghetto was there *before* the city. They didn't move out when Cincinnati grew up, and in later years people said, 'Oh, that's the slums, that's the ghetto.' But in fact, they'd been there first.

This is just like the hackers, who went out into the frontier and built their little settlement. And they're still there, and they'll always be there, and there'll always be people using crypto, and there'll always be people doing something creative with this technology. But they're going to be like the slums surrounded by the millions of bourgeois, who are going to come in and be the Cincinnati of cyberspace. And there this slum will be, where you can go when you want to hear authentic music and mingle with the bohemian lowlife. So it'll be just another lifestyle option on the Net. The rest of it will be Home Shopping Network."

Meanwhile, with bated breath and no little envy, market-watchers and hip technophiles alike are waiting to see what the next move will be for the Net's newest "cool" content deliverer: Pointcast, a company whose president was recently quoted in *Investor's Business Daily* as saying, "We want to be to the Internet what ABC and NBC have been to TV."

I kicked television for this? —————



Now, however, as it becomes clear what the Net is most useful for (better-targeted advertising, and more-efficient global marketing and selling), there'll be more of a focus on that and less tolerance of anyone standing in the way.

SEX

J.G. Ballard's proto-cyberpunk novel *Crash* is now a controversy and Rosanna Arquette. Boed and bravoed at Cannes and banned





movie by David Cronenberg, starring James Spader, Holly Hunter and James Remington, *Crash* was an instant *cause célèbre*.

In mythic terms, the car crash – memorably defined in Jacob Kulowski's *Crash Injuries: The Integrated Medical Aspects of Automobile Injuries and Deaths* as “an extremely complicated phenomenon of a very brief duration ending in destruction” – is at once a precognitive dream of our fusion with our machines and a ritualized enactment of the moment when we lose control of them.



In J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, a proto-cyberpunk novel partly inspired by *Crash Injuries*, and now translated to the screen by David Cronenberg, the car crash attains a nightmare sublimity. In the detached, exact language of the forensic pathologist and the engineer, Ballard shadows forth “a new sexuality born from a perverse technology”: “In his vision of a car-crash with the actress, Vaughan was obsessed by many wounds and impacts – by the dying chromium and collapsing bulkheads of their two cars meeting head-on... by the compact fractures of their thighs impacted against their handbrake mountings, and above all by the wounds to their genitalia, her uterus pierced by the heraldic beak of the manufacturer's medalion, his semen emptying across the luminescent dials that registered forever the last temperature and fuel levels of the engine.”

Violent and passionless, beyond ego psychology or social mores, it is a posthuman sexuality “without referentiality and without limits,” as Jean Baudrillard puts it in his essay on *Crash*. Alienated from a body that seems, more and more, like a pre-industrial artifact, this new sexuality fetishizes urban desolation, televised disasters, celebrities and commodities (above all, the automobile).

In *Crash*, sex happens almost entirely in cars; removed from that context, it loses its appeal. The body is erotic only when it intersects with technology or the built environment, either literally (punctured by door handles, impaled on steering columns) or figuratively (“The untouched, rectilinear volumes of this building fused in my mind with the contours of her calves and thighs pressed against the vinyl seating”). A young woman's body bears testimony to a severe automobile accident; to the narrator, who was himself injured in an accident that imprinted his car's instrumentation on his knees and shins, she has been reborn: “The crushed body of the sports car had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality, releasing within its twisted bulkheads and leaking engine coolant all the deviant possibilities of her sex. Her crippled thighs and wasted calf muscles were models for fascinating perversities.”

Here, as in films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Blade Runner*, humans are dispassionate mannequins while the technology around them is disconcertingly anthropomorphic: The “grotesque overhang of an instrument panel forced on to a driver's crotch” in an accident conjures a “calibrated act of machine fellatio,” while the “elegant aluminized air-vents” in a hospital “beckon as invitingly as the warmest organic orifice.” In the deprived geometry of *Crash*, semen and engine coolant, crotches and chromium instrument heads are congruent.

“I believe that organic sex, body against body, skin area against skin area, is becoming no longer possible,” said Ballard, in a 1970 interview, “simply because if anything is to have any meaning for us it must take place in terms of the values and experiences of the media landscape.”

Published in 1973, *Crash* refracts what Marshall McLuhan called “the widely occurring cluster image of sex, technology and death” through the splintered lens of consumer culture, with its flattened affect, celebrity worship, obsessive documentation of every lived moment, and psychotic confusion of subjective experience and filmic fictions. Improvising on these themes with a gleeful viciousness that is equal parts surrealism, Pop art and punk, Ballard portends their convergence in the terminal reality we now inhabit.

David Cronenberg

Mark Dery: In his introduction to the French edition of *Crash*, J.G. Ballard calls the novel "an extreme metaphor for an extreme situation, a kit of desperate measures only for use in extreme crises." Are we living in a historical moment far from equilibrium, to borrow a term from chaos theory? Aerial disasters, alien abductions, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Götterdämmerung at the Branch Davidian compound, the murder of JonBenet Ramsey: Is *Crash* an appropriate metaphor for our Age of Extremes?

David Cronenberg: Well, it's tempting to look at whatever times one lives in as being in crisis and pivotal and millennial and all of that, but I can't believe that such things don't happen all the time. I think humans are strange, extreme

creatures, and that we're deluded by the relative order of even, say, a New York street.

We're deluded into thinking that the relative order is us, and that the chaos is somehow not us, or is a pathological version of us, or is a momentary us that will pass, when in fact I think that both the order and the chaos are completely us – the Dionysian and the Apollonian held in a strange tension. So I think we're always in extreme times, and I think that when we think we're not, as in the '50s, we later see that of course we were; our delusions were just a little stronger, that's all.

In *Confessions of a Fast Woman*, Lesley Hazleton recalls the time she hit 110 m.p.h. in her Porsche 911: "It was as though I became the car, or the car became me.... Road, driver

and machine were blended into a single entity, an unholy union of asphalt and steel and flesh."

I have a built-in resistance to seeing these things as leading us somewhere.

Someone like yourself, who clearly has a sense of historical context is less likely to wake up every morning feeling that the millennium is upon us.

Yeah. But I do sense that some of the things that I deal with in *Crash*, at a 25-year remove from when Ballard was writing the novel, are significantly different from what has gone before, and one of these things is the nature of sexuality, which I really think is changing – changing in a way that we have not seen before. What that will lead to, I don't know. Now, one can say, "Well, in ancient Rome there were everything from transexuals to transvestites to hermaphrodites," and it's true. That culture dealt with those things in its own way; they also went through a sort of free-flowing phase, their version of our '60s, followed by a very puritanical phase where these things were seen as a threat to Roman civilization, and so on. But I think that one of the differences is technology. Of course, there has always been technology: Language is a technology, and any written language is

a huge technology. I always like it when someone says, "Oh, I'm very anti-technology: I only write with a pencil." I say, "Do you know how much technology is embodied in a pencil, and in written and spoken language? Something like 50,000 years of evolution is contained in that technology!"

The Unabomber's problem, precisely. Where does technology begin? His handmade bombs? His broken-down bicycle? His typewriter? Language itself?

Absolutely. It's a delusion! It's a strange, schizophrenic thing that he's doing, segmenting those things, and it betrays a real ignorance of what technology is, because a broken-down bicycle could not have been conceived of a few hundred years ago, and only a monster technology has allowed it to be possible. But let me pick up our earlier thread, which was sex. I think the fact that we can now reproduce without sex is a huge moment in human history.

You mean through cloning or in vitro fertilization?

Right. One can anticipate a time, maybe not too far in the future, when you won't need humans at all to reproduce humans, where the DNA could be reproduced synthetically and you'll have synthetic sperm and eggs. The question then becomes, "What is sex?" It has never, for humans, been a simple matter of reproduction. In fact, there have been cultures that didn't even connect sex with reproduction. Now, we're at a point where we consciously see sex being cut free from its biological imperatives and demanding to be redefined, reinvented – a very existential development that forces us to take the responsibility of deciding what sex will be. It's a very powerful force, still very much inbuilt in us, but it no longer has the purpose that it had before. Whereas sex has always been used in

various ways, from weaponry to art to performance art, it's now demanding to be profoundly redefined, and it's technological developments that have caused this. I don't think it's just a conceptual change; I think eventually it'll be a very functional difference.

What, exactly, do you mean by that?

Well, I think that more and more people will use sex less and less for reproduction. This isn't a Brave New World warning that sex will be controlled for genetic breeding purposes. I don't necessarily see it being ominous, *per se*; I just think that, in the natural course of things, there will be less haphazard natural child-creating and more controlled child-creating, which will make it more obvious that sex has become a new thing.

I think your comments on sexuality go to the heart of *Crash*, which wrestles with the question of posthuman sexuality in the media-bombarded, advertising-barraged cultural landscape of the late 20th century.

"Posthuman?" I think all this is totally human, but go ahead.

In his introduction to the French edition of *Crash*, Ballard writes, "Despite McLuhan's delight in high-speed information mosaics we are still reminded of Freud's profound pessimism in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile basis of our dreams and longings — these diseases of the psyche had now culminated in the most terrifying casualty of the 20th century: the death of affect." He calls *Crash* "cautionary, a



warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape." Ballard leaves us with the impression that *Crash* is a morality play about the Death of the Human in the irradiated testing ground of postmodern technoculture. And yet the book itself feels as if it were written by a robot historian; it's a cautionary tale about the death of affect written in an utterly affectless style. The introduction is profoundly moralistic, but the narrative is beyond good and evil — beyond emotion, even, and in that sense, posthuman.

I was onstage with Ballard at the ICA in London, where we had a conversation, and I talked to him a lot about that introduction because there are things that he discusses in it that my movie might well not be about. I wanted to ask him whether that was part of his original understanding of what he was doing or not, and in fact it wasn't. He did the book first and then afterwards he set in the rationale, which made me feel good because that's how it feels to me. The impulse to make the movie, and the process of making the movie, comes before the critical analysis. Not that I'm not interested in analysis, but the two don't come from the same place; it's a different part of the brain that does those two things. Another thing that I asked him about, relative to his introduction to the French edition, was his discussion of the book as technoporn. He calls it "the first pornographic novel based on technology."

Right. He bemoans the death of affect and then, in literally the next sentence, says that its demise opens the floodgates of the unconscious to our most deliciously diseased fantasies. We go from Freud's pessimism to a De Sadean pleasure dungeon in the space of a sentence.

I disagreed with him about those things or, rather, thought that they needed some clarification, and I found it very edifying to hear him say that he wasn't thinking these things when he wrote the book.

But he liked the film, in any event.

Oh, he absolutely loves the film. He has publicly said that it goes much further than the book.

How so?

He feels that the movie begins where the book ends, which I think is very interesting. We've got about five really neat things to talk about here: Let's start with the death of affect. I don't think Ballard's analysis of his novel — the analysis that he did in the introduction — is adequate, and that makes perfect sense to me, because as an artist I can see my own movie and analyze it and if I'm being attacked for being a pornographer then I'm going to say that the movie has nothing to do with pornography. But later, I might say, "Well, it does have *some* connections with pornography, but I felt they were too subtle to be mentioned at the time, for political reasons." So far as the notion of "posthumanism" is concerned, I feel that technology is human, and I feel that unless that's understood

you get nowhere; you're going around in circles. When people talk about what technology is doing to us, I say, "But technology *is* us." It's an extension of us — this is very McLuhanesque — human will made physical. Technology does not exist in the universe except as it emanates from human beings and human culture. It's almost like dream life, in that it's an expression of our fantasies as well. So we cannot disconnect from it and say that it comes from outer space or it's this bad thing that happened to us; it's a mirror of us, and if we don't like what we see in the mirror of technology, then fine, we can decide to change it. But it *is* us, which is why I don't see technology as de-humanizing us, transforming us into posthuman beings. Now, maybe it's some part of us we don't like or a part of us that we don't want to define as part of our humanness. Fine, but it is us. I feel that is a hugely basic truth, and if that's not understood, then you're just going to go around in circles which, in a way, is what Ballard does in that introduction, as you point out. Bertolucci said that *Crash* was a religious masterpiece, because he felt that the characters were like little Christs, sacrificing themselves on our behalf so that we can watch but not have to do it. There's some truth there, because in a way I'm experimenting; *Crash* is my lab. I'm saying, "Okay, let these people do what they do; don't make a moral judgment, don't restrict them, just see where it takes us." I see them as being forced by their own inner impulses to reinvent

the old forms of things that they feel are not working. That includes sexuality, but it also includes emotion – the ways emotion is expressed, social interaction, even language. Maybe this involves the death of affect, to which one might say, “Well, maybe affect is not that great; maybe that’s the bad part of human nature.”

One might say that, but do you?

No, I don’t. I say that these people have not been able to express their emotions in the forms that are available to them because what they’re trying to express is impossible in the language that exists, which is very Wittgensteinian. So, to a small degree, I’m reinventing film language in order to allow my characters to express things to themselves in their own emotional language. I see *Crash* as an existential romance. That simply means that maybe affect – which is to say, what we consider emotion and the way in which it is expressed – needs to find new avenues, new forms in order to express the things that we need to express these days, things which cannot be expressed using the old clichés about love or sexuality or family or whatever. We’re feeling some things that haven’t been felt before, because the complexities of life are quite different than they were before. It’s what McLuhan was talking about: We keep driving and looking into the rear-view mirror.

An appropriate metaphor for Crash.

You know, I resisted that shot of the eyes in the rear-view mirror, although I do have somebody looking in the mirror, but you don’t see what he’s seeing. In any event, I agree with you that the book is very amoral, or at least not as judgmental as Ballard is in his preface. That’s part of what was very powerful about it, and part of what I wanted to continue to do in the movie.

You’re suggesting that the tone of the book is morally neutral – but couldn’t one make the argument that the narrator’s seemingly clinical detachment from the events going on around him brings home the “terrifying casualty” Ballard is talking about? That the operating-theater objectivity of his descriptions, the use of technical terminology to bleach the emotional color out of even the most intimate experiences – never the cunt, nor even the vagina, but always the “natal cleft,” for instance – is itself a critique of the posthuman pathologies the narrator embodies?

And yet he calls the narrator James Ballard, so there’s a real paradox, a struggle going on there. I agree that one can say that that clinical quality is a critique on its own, because it’s so bloodless. But on the other hand, one could also say that it’s a way of not tipping what he’s saying one way or the other. At first this clinical stuff seems like a negative criticism, but then one begins to see it as a struggle for balance, an attempt to use the most neutral terms possible. So when he says “natal cleft,” you’re thinking, “God, this is so dry, he’s obviously not approving of this sex,” but on the other hand, some of it’s very sexy. The weird thing about *Crash* is that at first it’s a complete turn-off, and then gradually you find yourself being turned on by things you never thought you’d be turned on by,

in language that you never imagined you’d be turned on by. That’s the art of it. Somehow, you’re getting the pure experience, from the narrator’s point of view, of this strange eroticism. It’s disturbing, just because it’s so abnormal and perhaps even dehumanized, although no one but a human could think these thoughts. I tried to do the same thing in the movie by creating a style that was sensual in some ways, and having very attractive people in the film, because I knew that, conceptually, many people would resist it. So to balance that, I tried to make it somewhat sensual and textural without making it deliriously



James (James Spader) and Catherine Ballard (Deborah Unger) in *Crash*.

luscious, you know. I tried to do the same thing cinematically that I felt Ballard was doing literarily.

McLuhan, who is clearly a cornerstone thinker for you....

Yes.

...maintains that the introspective, sovereign self of the Enlightenment – which is more or less synonymous with our notion of the human – is an artifact of the print medium. McLuhan suggests that the closed, coherent ego born of the book is altogether different from the late-20th-century self, “retribalized” by electric media. He says, “Electric circuitry is Orientalizing the West. The contained, the distinct, the separate – our Western legacy – are being replaced by the flowing, the unified, the fused.” This sounds a lot like Ballard’s vision of “the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities” that characterizes a mass-mediated reality where celebrities and serial killers have colonized our dream lives. In Posthuman, Jeffrey Deitch writes, “As radical plastic surgery, computer-chip brain implants, and gene-splicing become routine... a new posthuman organization of personality will develop that reflects peoples’ adaptation to this new technology and its socioeconomic effects.” My point is that our tools have begun to remake us in their own image, and when we confront the results in the mirror, they look less and less recognizably human.

But why would you call that “posthuman?” What’s not human about it? I think it’s a dangerous term, in that it can lead to misunderstandings because it suggests, you know, “not human.” If you said “posthumanistic,” I could understand that, but “posthuman” is pretty loaded. A lot of people would love to jump on that bandwagon, saying, “Yeah, we’re almost not human anymore, we’re controlled by everything, we’re inhuman, we’re cyborgs,” and that’s just a total cop-out. I think you’re describing different aspects of human psychology. For example, going back to this notion of affectless characters, what’s necessarily wrong with seeing two-dimensional characters? I mean, who says you have to sympathize with characters, that you have to identify with them? Those are all Freudian-based conceits, which, of course, go back to Aristotle and the whole notion of catharsis. But we’ve seen modern art, and we can say that there are other ways to discuss the human condition without understanding it as non-human but just approaching it from a different aspect.

You’re lobbying for an expanded definition of the human.

Yes. I become Nietzschean beyond that and maybe even Wittgensteinian in the sense that I really see our version of existence as a human construct. We cannot,

They get completely confused and disconnect. In a way, the very structure of *Crash* is as much a problem as the whole question of affect.

One last question, the inevitable one: Have you ever been in a crash?

Only on the racetrack. I’ve never been hurt in a car crash, although I have some scars from a motorcycle crash. And did I find the experience sexy? Yeah, actually, I did. Scars are very sexy. There were times in history when that was acknowledged – the much-sought-after Heidelberg dueling scar, for example. And now, scarification, branding, tattooing, piercing have become fairly common, even bourgeois. They all say the same thing: My body has been transformed, my body has been played with, tampered with, invaded, penetrated; it has survived and now it’s a new thing – requires, in fact, a new aesthetic to be appreciated. And that is sexy.

J.G. Ballard

Mark Dery: David Cronenberg told me that during your recent public dialogue with him at the ICA in London, the question of the moralistic tone you took in your introduction to the French edition of Crash came up. I’ve always wondered about that,



J.G. Ballard

The weird thing about *Crash* is that at first it’s a complete turn-off, and then gradually you find yourself being turned on by things you never thought you’d be turned on by, in language that you never imagined you’d be turned on by. That’s the

art of it.

by definition, be non-human or inhuman because we cannot be beyond it; all there is in the universe is us. I mean, for me there is no morality in the universe other than that created by human beings; there is no consciousness, other than that created by human beings; and so on, and so on. So these changes you’re talking about cannot be non-human or inhuman. Now, they can be something we don’t like, part of human nature that we hate and wish didn’t exist and maybe try actively to suppress. But to say it’s “posthuman”...

I take your point. In any event, Crash strikes me as an attempt to replace the print-based psychology of Typographic Man, which still dominates the mainstream novel – what Ballard calls the “mood of introspection and alienation... that belongs entirely to the 19th century” – with the mass-mediated psychology of the Information Age.

Wouldn’t it be ironic if Ballard succeeded at that and then, looking at it, said, “My God, there’s no psychology here that I can recognize; this is terrible. This must be what the novel is about – how bad this is.” When, in fact, it’s not. Maybe he’s got a formal problem as well, in terms of structure. I certainly find people having formal problems with the movie, not understanding how to deal with the structure of it. It looks like it might work like, you know, *Fatal Attraction* – you’ve got this attractive, upper-middle-class couple who don’t have to worry about money; they’re having affairs. But then it doesn’t work out any way you could imagine.

because it seems out-of-tune with the book itself, which is flatly reportorial, appropriate to the flattened affect of the characters. Cronenberg said that you confessed to him that you appended that introduction after Crash was written, and that you had some doubts about how consonant it was with the book.

J.G. Ballard: The question you’ve asked is one that was asked by a member of the audience. David made it quite clear that he didn’t see the film as a cautionary tale, and I pointed out that at the time I wrote *Crash*, roughly 25 years ago, I certainly didn’t see it as a cautionary tale. I was exploring certain trajectories that I saw moving across the mental sky of the planet, following them to what seemed to be their likely meeting point. Moral considerations were neither here nor there; I saw myself in the position of a computer attached to a radar set, tracking an incoming missile. In fact, most of the introduction to the French edition of *Crash* consists of an endorsement of the non-moralistic view of *Crash*, in that I make the point that an author can no longer preside like a magistrate over his characters and place their behavior within some sort of moral frame, which is the traditional stance of the author in fiction. Most criticism of the novel sees it as an instrument of moral criticism of life; that’s

Somehow, you’re getting the pure experience, from the narrator’s point of view, of this strange eroticism.



Isla Fisher (Rosario Arquette) in *Crash*

the *raison d'être* that justifies the teaching of English literature at universities. Most of my introduction disputes this view that the novelist is a moral arbiter, and it's only in the last paragraph that I actually say that I regard *Crash* as a cautionary tale. Which I *do*, in the sense that *Crash*, whatever else it is, is a warning, and insofar as it issues a warning, it's a cautionary tale. I mean, a road sign say-

ing, "Dangerous bends ahead; slow down," is not making a moral statement, it's being cautionary. In that sense, I'd like to think that David's film is a cautionary tale.

In what regard?

Well, I don't want to invoke Swift's "Modest Proposal," because it's so easy to do, but it is possible to play devil's advocate by deadpanning an attitude that seems to be 180 degrees at variance with what one's supposed to be doing.

This often seems to be lost on critics, especially of the moralistic stripe, who, if they have a common trait, seem to exhibit an almost painful earnestness that vaporizes irony on contact.

Absolutely.

As a result, there's a tendency to take Crash literally.

I think this ambiguity is very important. People have constantly asked me over the last year, and they were saying it to me nearly 25 years ago when *Crash* was published, "What are you saying? Do you believe that we should all be going out and crashing our cars? You can't be serious!" But that ambiguity is part and parcel of the whole thing. In *Crash*, I'm taking certain tendencies that I see inscribed in the world we live in and I'm following them to their point of contact. Putting it crudely, I'm saying, "So you think violence is sexy? Well, this is where it leads."

In The Kindness of Women, you write, of the '60s, "The demise of feeling and emotion, the death of affect, presided like a morbid sun over the playground of that ominous decade." Again, in the introduction to the French edition of Crash, you call the death of affect "the most terrifying casualty of the century." But then you go on to say that "the demise of feeling and emotion have paved the way for... our moral freedom to pursue our own psychopathology as a game." Now, I know the surrealist in you is gladdened by the prospect of virtual environments where one might preside over De Sadean debauchery with moral impunity. But I wonder how you reconcile that rollercoaster giddiness at the moral vertigo of postmodern culture with your clear recoil from the cauterizing of the soul that results from ceaseless media bombardment — what you call "the preempting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen." To you, the emotional numbness that is part of the radioactive fallout of the Information Age is inarguably "a terrifying casualty,"

but on the other hand, it throws wide the floodgates to a surrealist utopia — a sort of pathological playground, a Luna Park of perversity.

Well, I agree with everything you've said except that last sentence, because I'm not trying to sell you this psychopathic package as some sort of utopian dream; quite the contrary. From the mid '60s, when I started writing the pieces that went

into *The Atrocity Exhibition*, I always saw myself as merely an observer, tracking various trends and tendencies and trying to uncover the hidden logic that was at work behind the Technicolor surface that so enchants most people. This doesn't mean that I endorse a world where we can play with our own psychopathologies as a game. I think that may, in fact, be the greatest threat the human race has ever faced. When we can, in some virtual playground, play at being a concentration-camp guard or any one of a thousand other grisly roles – for example, acting out the parts of Fred and Rosemary West, the English couple who raped and murdered their children – I think the human race will really face a threat. You see elements of all this pushing at the door all the time, just waiting for the technology to facilitate all its possibilities. In respect to *Crash*, I'm the forensic pathologist looking at this decaying corpse, a corpse that's emitting some wonderfully colorful gases and giving some enticing twitches, and saying, "Well, this is where I see things going." *Crash* is an extreme-case scenario. I mean, if you said to me, "Do you think we should all go out and crash our cars?" I would say, "Of course not!" This is a very important distinction. I've never said that car crashes are sexually exciting; I've been in a car crash, and I can tell you it did nothing for my libido! What I have said is that the idea of car crashes is sexually exciting, which is very different and, in a way, much more disturbing. Why is it that our imaginations seem so fixated on this particular kind of accident?

To my mind, you're one of the first novelists to offer a science-fiction premonition of the post-modern ego, spun off its axis by information overload – a centripetal self that is utterly unlike the inward-turning psyche of what McLuhan would call Typographic Man, born of book culture. It's a decentered self, to use Fredric Jameson's term, disoriented by the geography of nowhere – the generic placelessness of malls and retail chains – and the vertiginous whirl of free-floating facts and images peeled loose from their referents. Does this resonate with your thinking?

Absolutely. For the last 30 years, ever since I started writing the pieces that made

hopes and ambitions, signs of the cerebral activity that has been transferred from inside the individual's skull into the larger mental space of the planetary communications landscape. Now that's a very dramatic shift, because it means that Freud's distinction between the latent and manifest content of a dream has to be applied to the outside world. You can't just say that these huge figments and fantasies that float across the planet and constitute our real sky can be taken at face value; they can't. Exactly 30 years ago, when I wrote my piece "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan," when Reagan was governor of California, I was trying to analyze – I won't say deconstruct, because that's a horrible word – what Reagan really represented. Part of the problem that some critics have with the apparent lack of depth in my characters arises from the fact that my characters, right from the earliest days when I started writing fiction, were already these disenfranchised human beings living in worlds where the fictional elements constituted a kind of externalized mental activity. They didn't need great psychological depth, because it was all out there, above their heads.

Watching the film, I was struck by the extent to which its pathological surrealism has come true. The whole idea of the sexuality of scars is literalized in the so-called "modern primitive" subculture, where those on the far fringes of

The normalizing of the psychopathic is most advanced, of course, in the area of sexuality. Sexual behavior that my parents would have deemed a one-way ticket to a criminal insane asylum is now accepted in the privacy of the bedroom, tolerable if both parties are in agreement. We're much less shocked than we used to be by deviant

behavior. I mean, the tolerance of male homosexuality and lesbianism and the huge range of what, previously, would have been regarded as out-and-out forms of psychopathy are now accepted.

up *The Atrocity Exhibition*, I've been saying that we live in a world of complete fiction; so much of what used to be an internalized psychological space within an individual's head – his hopes, dreams and all the rest of it – has been transferred from inside our individual skulls into the corporate sensorium represented by the media landscape. You see people, these days, who give the impression that their minds are a complete vacuum; no dreams or hopes of any importance, even to themselves, emanate through the sutures of their skulls, as it were. But that doesn't matter, in a sense, because the environment itself is doing the dreaming for them. The environment is the greater sensorium generating these individual

youth culture have taken up scarification as a fashion trend and tribal totem. Crash seems less and less like "an extreme metaphor for an extreme situation," as you call it in your introduction, than a laboratory study of an increasingly bizarre culture.

Well, at the ICA conversation in London, I said that *Crash* illustrates what I call the normalizing of the psychopathic – the way in which formerly aberrant or psychopathic behavior is annexed into the area of the acceptable. This has been proceeding for probably a century, if not more, but certainly it has gathered pace tremendously in the last 30 or 40 years, and it's been aided by the proliferation of new communications technologies: television, home videos, videogames and

all the rest of that paraphernalia, which allows the anatomizing of desire. The normalizing of the psychopathic is most advanced, of course, in the area of sexuality. Sexual behavior that my parents would have deemed a one-way ticket to a criminal insane asylum is now accepted in the privacy of the bedroom, tolerable if both parties are in agreement. We're much less shocked than we used to be by deviant behavior. I mean, the tolerance of male homosexuality and lesbianism and the huge range of what, previously, would have been regarded as out-and-out forms of psychopathy are now accepted. And this extends beyond sexuality, into other realms as well. To take a trivial example, among my parents' generation, shoplifting was one of the most reprehensible things the ordinary person could do, and if you were arrested, it would lead to social ostracism. Nowadays, if your neighbor were arrested for shoplifting, one would be sympathetic: "Poor woman, her husband's been having all these affairs, she's been very unhappy...." We're extremely tolerant of behavior that would have outraged our parents' generation.

Again, in the introduction to *Crash*, you write that "the demise of feeling and emotion has paved the way for all our most real and tender pleasures... in the excitements of pain and mutilation." In *Crash*, sex, although unencumbered by the trappings of S&M, is characterized by a ritualized brutality that is undeniably sadomasochistic. What do you make of the strip-malling of S&M, in the basement scene in *Pulp Fiction*, in Madonna's *Sex*, in Gianni Versace's bondage collection, in *Batman Forever* and so on? S&M seems to be emerging as the talismanic sexuality of millennial culture.

I agree with you; it's everywhere – in magazines, advertising and the like. One wonders what the subtext really is. Whether it's purely a sort of style, introducing a bawdy fascism – the glamour of the jackboot, the thrill of the psychopathic and the forbidden – or whether it's a kind of personal theater in which one sees a preview of those virtual reality fantasies we were discussing earlier, I don't know. It strikingly dramatizes all sorts of moral ambiguities; it's a willful mimicry of activities that in any other space would be regarded as near criminal.

The Surrealists were great fans of De Sade, and enshrined him as an honorary Surrealist. Have you ever immersed yourself in him?

Immersed myself in De Sade? What a thought! [laughs]. He was, in his way, a

genius; I once described *The 120 Days of Sodom* as a "black cathedral of a book." De Sade is an enormously important influence on us, and has been for a long while. He creates a highly convincing anti-society, which defies bourgeois society



James (James Spader) and Catherine (Deborah Unger) in *Crash*

and liberalism by constructing a community based on torturers and their willing victims. Now, that's a prospect that the liberal conscience just cannot cope with. I'd like to think that *Crash* is a movie De Sade would have adored.

You seem to enjoy nettling ideologues and moral crusaders at both extremes of the political spectrum, and yet, in your review of Maurice Lever's "Marquis De Sade" (included in A User's Guide to The Millennium), you raise the moral flag yourself, noting that "the jury will always be out" on De Sade, whose "novels have been the pillow-books of too many serial killers for comfort."

Well, that's a worry, isn't it? Some of your questions seem to challenge me on the grounds that I don't have a complete manifesto, a party platform that will address all questions – you know, "What are your views on the common-market agricultural policy? What are your views on abortion?" I don't have set-piece answers; I have question marks. One can see, on one hand, that De Sade is an enormously important figure in European and American thought. On the other hand, he has been the pillow reading of too many psychopaths – the Moors Murderers, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, who killed children, for example. One of the Surrealists – Breton, I think – said that the ultimate Surrealist act would be to take a revolver and fire at random into a crowd. Now, one can salute the brilliance of that insight,

but at the same time, if somebody actually found a revolver and put that insight into practice, one would have to deplore it. This same ambivalence, this ambiguity, is at the heart of something like *Crash*, and this is what people find difficult to cope with – that there's no clear moral compass bearing. I'll be very interested to see how the film is received in the US. I don't know whether you're aware of the fact that it's effectively banned in England? It's an extraordinary event in its own right. I mean, this film, which is shown in Greece and Portugal – hardly hotbeds of the avant-garde – is banned in England! Can you imagine? The country that gave the world habeas corpus and which has been a lighthouse of freedom of expression for so long, has actually banned this film. In the general election that will probably be held in a few months time, the present government is threatened with a loss of the office it has held for 17 years. It's terrified at the prospect of Tony Blair, the Labor leader, getting in, and has been casting around for anything that can help it. So, they looked over these horrendous crimes we've had lately, like the one where some madman in Scotland entered a school and shot all those children, and then another street car came along, with "morality" in place of the word "desire," and they immediately climbed on board and started ringing the

disparity between the downsized and the upwardly mobile. All these ingredients get stirred into a witches' brew of conspiracy theory and millenarian craziness. Do you feel that there's any substance to this, or is it simply the same sort of millennial mania one sees throughout history?

Well, there's no doubt that it's the mood at present. When I wrote my introduction to *Crash*, 23 years ago, I referred to the very twin-like motif of sex and paranoia that dominated our time. My God, they do! People do feel that the mental skies are full of sinister black helicopters. Whether it's end-of-the-millennium fever or whether it actually is something much larger, I don't know. People realize that they're living in a totally valueless world – that morality is coming to an end, in the sense that the moral institutions that have underpinned society and given it some sort of fleeting purpose are being dismantled. Whether that is true or not, I think people feel that it is. I mean, we see evidence of it.

In the sort of pathological crimes – "random acts of senseless violence," to use the tabloid term – you were talking about a few minutes ago?

Yes, but it also applies to the entire social spectrum. If you look at the US, Nixon was hounded from office for a serious offense that put a large number of his col-

I've always said that Kennedy's murder is the greatest mystery of the 20th century, a mystery

bell. At this moment, along came *Crash*, which, had it come out a year ago or a year from now, would have been an art-house film; nobody would have noticed it. At the same time, people understand that the entertainment that constitutes the national culture of the country thrives on violence and sensation, and in a desperate rush to judgment, they think there's some sort of connection between a film like *Crash* and the murders of these innocent children in Scotland. So in the midst of all this instability, the very moral frame that you find, even in the most perfunctory way, around the average Bruce Willis film, is absent from *Crash*. In a movie like *Goodfellas*, people get brutally beaten to death, but one can say, "Well, these are the bad guys, they're *out there*." But that moral framework is completely absent from *Crash*, which provokes the audience, because the implication is that this film is about you, not just these fictional characters. That's profoundly unsettling. And then there's also the peculiar fact that *Crash* is in many ways a love story, an account of how a husband and wife rediscover their love for each other. In that sense, it's a highly romantic film, which also unsettles people.

Speaking of "all this instability," you've circled around one of the subjects I wanted to address – namely, the received notion in the US that the gyre is widening, that the center cannot hold. Black helicopters darken our mental skies, along with the fiery Armageddon at David Koresh's Ranch Apocalypse, the Oklahoma bombing, alien abductions, Satanic ritual abuse, and more-palpable problems such as the end of work as we know it and the widening income

leagues in jail, and when you compare him with your present president, who from what one reads has got a great number of moral question marks – to put it at its mildest – hanging over him, people are strangely tolerant of Clinton's corruption. I don't think it's the tolerance of wise benevolence, necessarily, but rather the tolerance of despair – the feeling that the only way to become president is to be corrupt.

Could it also be a kind of media fatigue, the

blowing of the psychological fuses we were talking about earlier? In Cronenberg's Videodrome, the media personality and S&M freak Nicki Brand says, "We live in over-stimulated times." Could it be that our nerve ends have been jangled so much since Nixon that they no longer respond, no matter how high the voltage?

I think it's true that our responses have become numb, to an enormous extent. Attention spans are shorter and shorter; we crave greater and greater stimulation. We seem to be in the trough of a wave; there's a huge wall rushing towards us, with a white crest, and I just hope that we can ride to the top of it and maybe see something – a larger, more interesting world – on the other side. On the other

that energized the decade that followed his death; it provided a whole system of operating metaphors for the '60s, and traces of its influence are to be found today.

hand, we may be swamped. We're living in very interesting times but, at the same time, deeply uncertain ones.

It's a curious conundrum that William Gibson wrote Neuromancer, the Ur-text of cyberspace, on an antique manual typewriter, and Fredric Jameson wrote Postmodernism, the

canonical text of that school of thought, on one as well. I wonder what profundities, (if any,) lie behind the fact that so many writers still cling to these obsolete machines when it comes to the actual technology of writing.

Well, I think it's partly to do with the fact that the business of writing is itself pre-Machine Age. I mean, I can remember when I got my first typewriter, at the age of about 19. That seemed to be a leap forward into a new machine realm that astounded me. I was suddenly able to "print out" all the short stories that I had written in longhand. Now, using a typewriter, even an electric one, seems very old-fashioned. I got an electric typewriter a few years ago. To be honest, it was quite a mental jump, actually, from a manual to an electric. I'd bore my

mirrors the mass media's psychotic break from reality in the late 20th century, is obsessed with the murder of JFK, an event he wants to reenact "in a way that makes sense," existentially. In your books and interviews, you return almost obsessively to that "greatest of all motorized tragedies," as you call it in The Kindness of Women; why is the Kennedy assassination such a signal event for you?

I've always said that Kennedy's murder is the greatest mystery of the 20th century, a mystery that energized the decade that followed his death; it provided a whole system of operating metaphors for the '60s, and traces of its influence are to be found today. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is really about the JFK assassination, in many ways. I saw Kennedy's death as a sort of religious sacrifice: A god-king was slain for inexplicable reasons. What had the Fates decided? We were moving into an area close to that of Aeschylus; we could see the Furies sitting on the cornices above Dealey Plaza, chanting some kind of blood-hate elegy. It was an extraordinary event; it sent ripples across the world that are still reverberating. Also, it came at a time of very significant change, when the print media were giving way to the new electronic media, in particular television. Although television had existed in the late '40s and the '50s, the news events shown on TV, at least here in England, were indistinguishable from the newsreels you saw in your local cinema. But by the '60s, one was beginning to see live events transmitted simply because the camera happened to be there; Zapruder just happened to have a movie camera pointing at Kennedy's car when he was shot, and the murder of Oswald was shown, I think, virtually live. So we were on the cusp of this transfer

I don't really agree with your view of the novel as "a giddy nightmare about the age of electronic autism." *Crash*, both the book and the film, describes how people find a new sexuality that seems able to adapt successfully to the new possibilities and constraints, and how this in turn rekindles their love for each other, though a love that is itself of a rare new kind.

poor girlfriend for hours describing the mysteries of the carriage return or correction tape. I mean, she had a PC! She thought I was mad.

Following McLuhan, did you feel that the medium was the message – that the technological conduit for your creativity affected the style and perhaps even the substance of your writing?

I don't think the medium affected my writing, so far as typewriters are concerned, but it certainly has happened in respect to the word processor, hasn't it? I do a lot of book reviewing, and although I've never used a PC, I'm absolutely certain that I can tell the difference between books that are written on PCs and those that are not. Books written on the PC have very high definition in the sense of line-by-line editing, grammar, sentence construction and the like. But the overall narrative construction is haywire. There's a tendency to go on and on and on, in a sort of logorrhea, and to lose one's grasp of the overall contents. Imagine, say, James Joyce at a word processor; *Finnegan's Wake* would have been incomprehensible!

The Atrocity Exhibition's protagonist, a doctor suffering from a mental breakdown that

from the old print media, which tended to be retrospective in the sense that it was yesterday's news they were sent in to cover, to the electronic media, where we live in an instantaneous world. This was very significant, because it abolished the past and the future, condensing everything into the present. And that's true of television today; there's no yesterday in television; it's this huge medium which has no history. I mean, nobody remembers what they saw on television a year ago, or scarcely even a week ago. We live in this all-pervading, all-dominating present. Television did that, and this was of course followed by the creation of the huge worldwide communication network that has linked everything from banking to shopping to the transfer of information of every conceivable kind, all of which creates an instantaneousness, a kind of perpetual present.

Throughout Crash, there is an almost "paranoiac-critical" confusion, to use Salvador Dalí's term, of bodies and the built environment, of flesh and commodity fetishes. There's an obsessive repetition of the word "geometry," as in, "My right arm held her shoulders, feeling the impress of the contoured leather, the meeting points of hemispherical and rectilinear geometries." Disappointingly, we catch only fleeting glimpses of this Euclidean eroticism in the

movie. I kept looking for signature images like "the conjunction of an air hostess's fawn gabardine skirt... and the distant fuselages of the aircraft," but they weren't there.

People have pointed that out. But to be fair to Cronenberg, no film can possibly contain the whole of a novel in a couple of hours. The important thing is to concentrate on the nervous system of the novel. I think David has done that; he's gone to the heart of the obsessional world that *Crash* describes.

I'm interested in your thoughts on the points at which the movie diverges from the book, for good or ill.

The biggest divergence, of course, is the dropping of the Elizabeth Taylor figure, who is Vaughan's target in the novel; he's obsessed with dying in a car crash with the film star. Cronenberg and I both agreed that no well-known actress would play herself in a film like *Crash*, where she was the target of a psychopathic driver; you'd be inciting every lunatic on the block. But by making more of Vaughan's obsession with James Dean, I think Cronenberg covered the same ground perfectly well. That was the main difference between novel and film, and I don't think it was significant. I've seen the film three or four times, and I constantly see things in it that I hadn't seen before. The performances are wonderful, and the film itself is very artfully constructed. It's ostensibly quite naturalistic, but in fact



it inhabits a strange, penumbral space. There's something deeply premonitory about it. Just as some films cast a light on the past, this one seems to cast a light into the future.

When I first saw *Crash* I thought, "How weird: Cronenberg reads *Crash* as softcore porn in the Helmut Newton

mode; it's arousing in a way that the book was never intended to be." I read *Crash* as a giddy nightmare about the age of electronic autism, where the nonstop shock treatment of the mass media has reduced humans to crash dummies and sex to the loveless coupling of mannequins. Lying in bed with his wife after having sex, the character Ballard notes that she seems as "inert and motionless as a sexual exercise doll fitted with a neoprene vagina"; reflecting on his liaison with Vaughan, he observes that "the sex act between us had been devoid of all sexuality." A movie that aspires to high-gloss softcore seems to miss the point; if *Crash* is anything, it's not erotic.

Well, there's more explicit simulated sex in Sharon Stone and Demi Moore movies I've seen than anything in *Crash*, but of course the context is much different. The characters in the film, as in the book, are exploring a new sexuality, whereas Sharon Stone and Demi Moore are exploring an old kind of sexuality that we all know about anyway. The excitements of *Crash* are the excitements of danger. The characters are exploring a wholly new sexuality. If the audience is excited, good.

But neither the book nor the film is meant to be erotic – both are about a far more serious subject, sex, and how the many diverse forms of sexuality today are competing with themselves, in a straightforwardly Darwinian sense, to ensure their survival into an age of advanced and very strange technologies. I don't really agree with your view of the novel as "a giddy nightmare about the age of electronic autism." *Crash*, both the book and the film, describes how people find a new sexuality that seems able to adapt successfully to the new possibilities and constraints, and how this in turn rekindles their love for each other, though a love that is itself of a rare new kind. Incidentally, I don't see Helmut Newton as a purveyor of softcore porn but as the creator of a unique imaginative world not too far from *Crash* – he loved Cronenberg's film, and I told him in London recently that if he ever made a film it might be like Cronenberg's *Crash*; he didn't disagree. When, after sex with Vaughan, the narrator uses the phrase you quote, he means sexuality in the traditional Sharon Stone/Demi Moore sense – or should I say, Derek Jarman sense? A new sexuality has been born out of their dreams of deformed automobile interiors, wounds and desires. For me, book and film are far too cool and self-aware to be erotic, but perhaps I'm showing my age! I never had an erection while writing the book, and would have regarded it as a failure if I had. But at a recent London screening, several women told me how erotic they found *Crash*. Think of the book and film as straightforwardly Sadean, though without the pleasure-in-pain that we wrongly attribute to the Divine Marquis.

Your characters are always trying to tear loose from the time-space continuum. In short stories like "The Garden of Time" and novels like *The Crystal World*, they cheat death and entropy by crystallizing, metamorphosing into glittering things for whom time itself has frozen in an eternal now. In his *Re/Search* essay on your work, David Pringle says, "The living things caught up in this process do not die; they become, as it were, embalmed in eternity." I wonder if the car crash is an attempt to tear through the fabric of reality – to "break on through," as the '60s catchphrase has it.

I think so, absolutely. As I've often said, we live in a world of manufactured goods that have no individual identity until something forlorn or tragic happens, because every one is like every other one. One is constantly struck by the fact that some old refrigerator glimpsed in a back alley has much more identity than the identical model sitting in our kitchen. Nothing is more poignant than a field full of wrecked cars, because they've taken on a unique identity that they never had in life.

One could imagine the car crash as a car's desperate attempt to establish, if only for a fleeting moment, a sort of selfhood, even at the expense of its existence.

Exactly. Very strange, that; paradoxical. Also, there is a deep melancholy about fields full of old machinery or wrecked cars because they seem to challenge the assumptions of a civilization based on an all-potent technology. These machine graveyards warn us that nothing endures.



The Trickster King

Shaman, trickster, madman.

Lee Perry is one of the guiding lights of contemporary black music. From his archaic recording studio in Jamaica he has produced some of the most influential Rastafarian and dub music ever recorded, changing the way blacks address high technology and ancestral forces.

Having abandoned the Jamaican tropics for the snowy peaks of Switzerland, the legendary reggae producer Lee Perry – aka Scratch, the Upsetter, the Super-Ape, Pipecock Jackson, Inspector Gadget, the Firmament Computer and a cornucopia of other monikers and aliases – now makes his home in one of the quietest corners of Europe. It's an odd but somehow fitting environment for Perry – not because precision clocks and banks have much to do with the intense, spooky and profoundly playful records he's known for, but because Lee Perry has always been something of a stranger in a strange land.



Though still capable of turning out brilliant tunes like “I Am a Madman” and “Secret Laboratory (Scientific Dancehall),” Perry’s current output pales next to the pivotal music he made in the 1960s and ’70s, especially the Rastafarian psychedelia he cooked up at his Black Ark studios in the mid ’70s. During that incredibly prolific period (he produced over 1,000 sides in 10 years), Perry fused his eccentric spiritual vision with powerful protest music, made some of the most surreal experiments with dub reggae, and sculpted the first (and arguably greatest) records by Bob Marley and the Wailers. Utilizing low-tech studio equipment with a brilliance and panache that continues to astound record producers and music fans today, Perry earned a place alongside Phil Spector and Brian Wilson as a visionary studio wizard who transformed pop music production into an art form all its own.

These days, it’s Perry himself who is the work of art. He appears in public festooned with pendants, parts of machines, bits of tape, patches, buttons and reflective mirrors. Everywhere he goes, it seems, he leaves a collage of scribbled notes, cryptic graffiti, scrap-metal idols, and paintings of lions and food. Responding to interviewers with a flurry of rhymes, riffs and puns, Perry turns innocent questions into a cosmological launching pad, revealing what John Corbett, in his book *Extended Play: Sounding off from John Cage to Dr Funkenstein* (1994), describes as “a world of hidden connections and secret pacts” – multinational conspiracy theories, Old Testament prophecies,



scatological rants, Rastafarian poetry, and incantations of the Jamaican folk witchcraft known as *obeah*.

All this takes Perry to the edge of madness – his apparent mental instability an intensely performative, almost shamanistic relationship with the chaos of creation. As Corbett points out, New World black culture has long linked the rhetoric of madness with excellence and innovation – musicians especially are praised for being “out of control,” “crazy,” “wild.” While Perry’s hermetic language games and comic-book metaphysics certainly owe something to his daily intake of what one observer described as an “inordinate amount of high-quality herb,” his mischievous irony also shows all the signs of the trickster incarnate. Even his “madness” may be a trick. Some colleagues report that when it’s time to talk business, Perry drops the loopy patois and cuts to the chase; the head of Heartbeat Records says that Perry “plays fool to catch wise.”

Perry is also a kind of Caribbean technologist, deploying his almost supernatural imagination within the technological context of the modern recording studio. With its soundboards, mikes, effects processors and multiple-track tape manipulations, the studio is clearly a kind of musical machine. However passionate and spontaneous pop songs may sound on the radio, the music itself is as much a product of engineering as of performance. Despite their crude equipment, reggae producers like Perry, King Tubby and Bunny Lee became artists in their own right – especially when it came to dub, the instrumental offshoot of reggae concocted entirely in the studio.

Modern Jamaican music begins with signals and machines. In the mid to late 1950s, during which a diminutive Lee Perry first arrived in Kingston from the sticks, the popularity of *mento* – an upbeat and topical Afro-Caribbean music similar to Trinidadian calypso – was giving way to a rage for American rhythm



and blues. At that time, powerful and increasingly independent US radio stations were turning away from the old national radio networks towards an inexpensive and popular alternative: DJs playing records for local markets. For the first time, signals were beamed directly at African-American communities. And when the weather was right, Jamaican kids churning through their radio dials would tune into Southern radio stations, and they went especially wild for the gritty, saucy sounds of New Orleans R&B.

From this enthusiasm sprang Jamaica’s “sound systems” – mobile discos that would invade halls and auditoriums with high-wattage amplifiers, turntables, DJs, imported American vinyl, and massive speaker stacks. Besides transforming the invisible figure of the radio DJ into a performer, sound systems also gave American grooves an unmistakable Jamaican twist by severely pumping

up the bass. Amplifying their woofers to the max, sound systems transformed R&B’s low end into a veritable force of nature – the kind of bass that does not just propel or anchor dancers but saturates their bones with almost cosmic vibrations.

In the late ’50s, the sound systems were ruled by a host of colorful characters like Duke Reid, who lorded over his “Treasure Isle” dances with a cartridge belt, an enormous gilt crown, and a shotgun that he would occasionally brandish when the competition between sound systems boiled to a head. These fierce rivalries had an obviously economic edge, but their roots lie in the competitive performance traditions of many West African cultures. The fight over customers waged by sound-system producers was also a style war, their fabricated alter egos, costumes and elaborate verbal boasts taking on an almost ritualistic – yet constantly reinvented – dimension. Such style wars show up in various guises across the African diaspora, from the taunts and “disses” of rappers to the yearly carnival competitions of Trinidad and Brazil, when various roving “bands” try to top each other and woo the crowd with music, dance and costume. As Lee Perry has said, “Competition must be in the music to make it go.”

Jamaica sound systems were unique in that this premodern, almost “tribal” competition was played out across the modern landscape of mechanically reproduced recordings. Rivalries were not so much a “battle of the bands” as a kind of technological and information warfare: Who had the heaviest bass? Who had the hottest records? In the ’50s, many DJs considered their imported sides exclusive, buying up all available copies of a new record or flying to the US to buy fresh discs. Spies would show up at rival sound-system parties, peering at the record labels over the DJ’s shoulder, and in response, DJs would scratch off labels or stick on false ones.

Here was an environment where a trickster like Lee Perry could thrive. Rejected by Duke Reid, who was spooked by something in his eyes, Perry went to work for Clement “Sir Coxone” Dodd’s rival Downbeat system, where he served as a talent scout, runner, gofer and occasional monkey-wrencher. Perry told one interviewer how he once put out the rumor that a certain fellow was selling really “dread sides.” Duke Reid went and bought them all without listening to them first. “And they all old stuff, duds!” For such antics, Duke’s men once stormed a Downbeat party and started punching people out, knocking Scratch unconscious.

With the decline of R&B in the US market and Jamaica’s independence from Britain in 1962, homegrown mutations begin to dominate sound systems. The most prominent was ska, a hopped-up, horn-driven and very danceable music. One apocryphal story attributes the intense offbeat punches of this music to the interference patterns that sliced up radio signals from the US. Perry start-

ed churning out ska at Coxone's Studio One, cutting edgy and punchy songs like "By Saint Peter" and "Chicken Scratch" – the latter earning "Scratch" his most lasting nickname.

Perry always had something of a persecution complex, and frequently turned on former friends and business partners. In part, this reflects the cut-throat environment of the Jamaican record industry, where what cultural critic Dick Hebdige describes as "tough and wily" producers often acted like pirates. But with Perry – who once knowingly sold thousands of copies of Bob Marley and the Wailers' *Soul Revolution II* with the wrong record inside – one can also see the mischievous and occasionally malicious hand of the trickster. Perry certainly incorporated personal attacks into his "mad" persona: A number of Perry songs badmouth former associates or mumble threats concerning *obeah* men, while the 1985 cut "Judgment Inna Babylon" accused the head of Island records of literally being a vampire.



After splitting acrimoniously from two top studios, Perry started up his own Upsetter studios in 1968 and soon released a tune attacking his former boss Joe Gibbs. Anticipating today's sampling craze, "People Funny Boy" included a crying baby in the mix in order to show how "upset" Perry was. But "People Funny Boy" also slowed down and reshuffled the usual rock-steady rhythm, a bass-heavy rhythm that by the late '60s had replaced the more simplistic beats of ska. In doing so, Perry helped engineer the beat that would come to dominate Jamaican music in the 1970s: reggae.

Though reggae recalls the relaxed rhythms of the old secular mento music, it has a meditative sustenance that some compare to religious church music or the Nyabbingi drumming of Rastafarian gatherings. Perry claims he just wanted to top his rivals with a new sound that had a "rebel bass" and a "waxy beat – like you stepping in glue." But the inspiration he cites was a Pocomania revivalist church he passed one night after drinking some beer: "[I] hear the people inside make a wail and say, 'let's make a sound fe catch the vibration of the people!' Them was in the spirit and them tune me spiritually. That's where the thing comes from, cos them Poco people getting sweet."

Pocomania was one of a number of independent revivalist churches that sprung up during Jamaica's "Great Awakening" of the 1860s, churches which exuberantly fused African and Protestant performance styles, images and traditions. Pocomania leaned to the African side of things, its Pentecostal-style services owing an obvious debt to African possession ceremonies. Worshipers would dance counter-clockwise to powerful drums while breathing very deeply; this "trumping" would sometimes bring on possession – the "little madness" that lent the church its name.

So at the root of the reggae, we have a little Lee Perry madness, a tale of catching vibrations and tuning into spiritual trance. But Perry played a far more direct role in developing the religious dimension of reggae when he began writing and recording songs with Bob Marley and the Wailers. The Wailers were a talented Studio One group known for sweet vocals, American soul covers and a rebel stance. As residents of Trenchtown, Kingston's most notorious slum, the Wailers were associated with Jamaica's "rude boys" – tough, poor and restless urban kids who flaunted authority (and sometimes the law). By the late 1960s, Marley and the Wailers were also turning toward Rastafari, a rebellious religious counterculture that wove together Black Pride, an "Ethiopian" reworking of biblical tenets, and a prophetic opposition to "Babylon" – the Rastafarian archetype of the modern nation-state, with its police, economic injustice and corrosive lifestyles. Perry collaborated with the future superstar on some of his earliest and most powerful songs, tunes that mixed sharp social commentary ("a hungry mob is an angry mob") with an ardent yearning for Jah.

Since the trappings of Rastafari have been packaged by the international reggae market and embraced – often superficially – by legions of white college kids, punks and hippies, we should scratch a bit beneath the surface of this vital New World religion. Like America's Black Muslims, the roots of Rastafari lie with the ethno-religious worldview sculpted by the Jamaican reformer Marcus Garvey. Founding the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1914, Garvey attempted to uplift and unite New World Africans by emphasizing the superiority of the black man and the glories of African civilization. Anticipating the Africentricity of today, Garvey preached the love of a black deity, a "God of Ethiopia." He also called for repatriation to the motherland, even founding a shipping and transportation company called the Black Star Line with the intention of transplanting New World blacks to Liberia. But Garvey never visited Africa, and his vision of Ethiopia had more to do with the visceral power of the religious imagination than with the concrete geopolitical realities of an African continent struggling with the ravages of European colonization. By Garvey's time, Black Christian churches had already embraced the biblical Ethiopia as a potent allegorical image of spiritual fulfillment, the millennial "Zion" that offered both a redemptive future and a

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glorious origin. Though Garvey's call for repatriation offered black folks an apparently concrete solution to the nightmare of abduction and slavery, the Africa he offered was a landscape of religious desire – a virtual world.

When Garvey quit Jamaica for the United States, he reportedly left his followers with this potent prophecy: "Look to Africa for the crowning of a

Black King; he shall be the Redeemer." In 1930, when Haile Selassie – aka Ras Tafari – was installed as King of Ethiopia, Garvey's Jamaican followers believed they had found their living god, and Rastafari was born. Ethiopia has been Judeo-Christian longer than most nations on the earth, and Selassie's bloodline was supposed to stretch back to King Solomon, his official titles – like "King of Kings" and "Lion of the Tribe of Judah" – drawn directly from biblical prophecy. Reading their own political and cultural desires into these Rorschach blots of messianic allegory, Rastafarians transformed the distant king into the Book of Daniel's bearded Ancient of Days, "the hair of whose head was like wool, whose feet were like unto burning brass."

As with Elijah Mohammed's Black Muslims, the early Rastafarians also racialized their theology. As the religious scholar Leonard Barrett explains in *The Rastafarians* (1977), "the White's god is actually the devil, the instigator of all evils that have come upon the world, the god of hate, blood, oppression and war; the Black god is the god of 'Peace and Love.'" Though contemporary Rastafarians speak of "One God" more than a black god, it's important to note the loosely gnostic elements here. Along with the Manichaean tension between the two gods, we have the old gnostic vision of a dark tyrant god who rules over souls in exile. According to Barrett, the early Rastafarians believed that slavery was initially a punishment for their sins, but that "they have long since been pardoned and should have returned to Ethiopia long ago." Only the evil trickery of the slavemaster prevents them from returning to the heavenly home where their living King awaits.

Both the separatist practices and the emotional core of Rastafarian life can be traced to this deeply felt sense that the Rastaman is *in* Babylon, but not *of* it. As Silja Joanna Aller Talvi writes, "From the Rasta's perspective, the whole world is full of Babylon, and Babylon systems are constantly seeking to oppress (or 'downpress') and exploit the African." Rejecting the authorities of this world, Rastafarians attempt to create a separate "God-like culture," in part by embracing the organic world of nature as a kind of anti-modern alternative to Babylon. Most Rastafarians are vegetarian, eat only *ital* (fresh and healthy) food, and reject commercial products and medicines; many also grow their hair in dreadlocks – the "natural" shape of long kinky hair that's washed but nei-

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ther combed, cut nor treated. Though Rastafari was spawned in the slums, many "locksmen" abandoned the urban hustle for lives as fishermen or simple farmers; those who remained were shunned by most respectable Jamaicans as "Black-hearts" or boogiemens.

Though the movement had a handful of charismatic leaders early on, and today includes

organized sects like the Twelve Tribes of Israel and even members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, most Rastafarians abhor institutions, grounding their faith in their own direct participation in the divinity and holiness of Jah. Somewhat like the early gnostic sects, most Rastafarians also believe that the Bible is an intentionally "mistranslated" document whose scrambled signals must be read selectively and allegorically in the light of personal revelation. One of the brightest guiding lights of Rastafari is the flame of the "chalice," stuffed with sticky marijuana buds that crackle during inhalation. Addressing the sacramental use of marijuana among Rastafarians, Barrett argues that "the real center of the movement's religiosity is the revelatory dimensions brought about by the impact of the 'holy herb.'" Long a Jamaican folk medicine, marijuana was probably introduced to the island by indentured East Indian Hindus, who gave the plant its popular name "ganja" and may have inspired its religious use (many of India's wandering mendicant "sadhus" also wear dreadlocks, eat vegetarian food and smoke hashish in a religious context). For all their glassy, bloodshot stares, it's wrong to think of Rastafarians as "stoners"; hardcore adherents consume ganja as a sacrament and rarely use other drugs or alcohol. One Rasta explained the role of ganja in strongly gnostic terms, though it is a gnosticism that's shot through with Rastafari's powerful social consciousness:

"Man basically is God, but this insight can come to man only with the use of the herb. When you use the herb, you experience yourself as God. With the use of the herb, you can exist in this dismal state of reality that now exists in Jamaica.... When you are a God, you deal or relate to people like a God. In this way you let your light shine, and when each of us lets his light shine, we are creating a God-like culture."

Barrett explains that to the Rastafarian, "the average Jamaican is so brainwashed by colonialism that his entire system is programmed in the wrong way.... To rid his mind of these psychic forces his head must be 'loosened up,' something done only through the use of the herb." As one Montego Bay "dread" described the plant ally, "It gives I a good meditation; it is a door inside."

Of course, music can also serve as a door inside. The chants and "churchical"

beats of traditional Nyabbingi drumming played a vital role in Rastafarian “Grounations,” communal celebrations notable for their *ital* feasts, ganja smoking and mystical theologizing. Though not directly influencing the reggae beat, Nyabbingi’s meditative rhythms did infuse reggae with the sense that music can help “loosen up” the shackles of everyday consciousness, sparking the inner light of righteous contemplation.

Bob Marley was not the first musician to bring Rastafari into Jamaican dance music, but with earthy hymns like “400 Years,” “African Herbsman” and “Duppy Conqueror,” he and Perry injected folkloric nectar into

their spare and sinewy arrangements with divine panache. Like American soul, but even more so, reggae would rapidly become a commercial product of the popular recording industry that nonetheless derived much of its power and appeal from a deeply religious set of images and desires. By no means was all reggae Rastafarian, but with “message” producers like Perry leading the way, Jamaica would produce perhaps the juiciest spiritual protest music of the 1970s. By the time of his death at the end of the decade, Bob Marley would rear his lion-like mane over a global stage as the first Third World pop star, his plaintive “redemption songs” spreading the message of Rastafari across a shrinking planet desperate for spiritual heroes.

Though Marley’s records were cleverly packaged by Island’s Chris Blackwell for a white rock audience, much of their appeal derives from the unshakable *authenticity* of the man, the righteous integrity he shared with many of reggae’s stars. In the ’70s, the cries and beats of Jamaica’s new “roots music” seemed to spring, not only from the hearts of suffering black folks but from the island soil itself. You could hear these roots in the music’s moist guitars and stoned pace, its “natural mystic” vibrations and its crunchy, spongy beats (Marley called it “earth-feeling music”). And you could feel the roots as well in the virtual Africa that hovered on the messianic horizon of the music, an ancient motherland and future kingdom built from the gnostic longings of souls exiled in the brave New World of Babylon.

But dub music, reggae’s great technological mutant, is a pure artifact of the machine, and has little to do with earth, flesh or authenticity. To create dub,

producers and engineers manipulate pre-existing tracks of music recorded in an analog – as opposed to digital – fashion on magnetic tape (today’s high-end studios encode music as distinct digital bits rather than magnetic “waves”). Dubmasters saturate individual instruments with reverb, phase and delay; abruptly drop voices, drums and guitars in and out of the mix; strip the music down to the bare bones of rhythm and then build it up again through layers of inhuman echoes, electronic ectoplasm and cosmic rays. Good dub

sounds like the recording studio itself has begun to hallucinate.

Dub arose from doubling – the common Jamaican practice of reconfiguring or “versioning” a pre-recorded track into any number of new songs. Dub calls the apparent “authenticity” of roots reggae into question because dub destroys the holistic integrity of singer and song. It proclaims a primary postmodern law: There is no original, no first

ground, no homeland. By mutating its repetitions of previously used material, dub adds something new and distinctly uncanny, vaporizing into a kind of *Doppelgänger* music. Despite the crisp attack of its drums and the heaviness of its bass, it swoops through empty space, spectral and disembodied. Like ganja, dub

opens the “inner door.” John Corbett even links the etymology of the word “dub” with duppie (Jamaican

patois for ghost). Burning Spear entitled the dub version of his great *Marcus Garvey* album *Garvey’s Ghost*, and Joe Gibbs

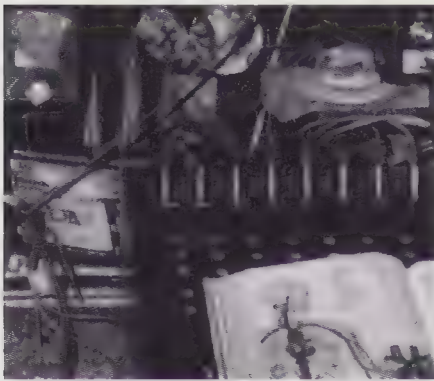
responded to Lee Perry’s production of Bob Marley’s “Duppy Conqueror” with the cut “Ghost Capturer.” Perry described dub as “the ghost in me coming out.” Dub music not only drums up the ghost in the machine, but gives the ghost room to dance.

Though he became one of its most surreal experimenters, Lee Perry did not invent dub reggae. That honor goes to Osbourne Ruddock, aka King Tubby, an electrical engineer who fixed radios and other appliances in Kingston in the 1950s and who built his own sound-system amplifiers to get the big bass sound. A musical genius, Tubby was also a gearhead, a tinkerer, an experimental geek. After discovering that he could remix the backing track of a popular tune into a new piece of music, Tubby played these “dub plate specials” to enthusiastic crowds at his Home Town Hi-Fi dances, where Tubby



would stand behind his customized mixing console, tweaking the beats on the fly while the DJ U Roy “toasted” over the rhythms.

Jamaican trends spread like wildfire, but Tubby stayed ahead of the dub game by working with top producers like Bunny Lee and Lee Perry, while endlessly tinkering with what Prince Buster called the “implements of sound.” Tubby constantly toyed with his four-track console, jerry-rigging echo delay units and creating sliding faders that allowed him to bring tracks smoothly in and out of the mix. He also just played tricks with the machine, generating his famous “Thunderclap” sound by physically hitting the spring reverb unit, or using frequency test tones to send an ominous sonar through the depths of dub’s watery domain. Though Tubby gave his records names like *Dub from the Roots* and *The Roots of Dub*, he had genetically engineered those roots into wires. However, dub did restore the roots of reggae’s own “dread ridims” by conjuring the ghost of West African polyrhythms via the unlikely mediation of the machine. Though modern Jamaican dance music adheres to the same 4/4 beat that drives most popular music, reggae was already unusual in accenting the



second and fourth beats of the measure and in “dropping” the initial beat, all of which produced the music’s unmistakable pulse. By anchoring the beat with the bass guitar rather than the drum kit, reggae also freed up the drums to explore subtler and more complex percussive play. As Dick Hebdige has pointed out in *Cut ‘n’ Mix* (1987), by the end of the 1970s,

drummers like Sly Dunbar were playing their kits like jazz musicians, improvising on cymbals, snares and tom toms to “produce a multilayered effect, rather like West African religious drumming.”

Dub launched these already tangled “ridims” into orbit, using technological effects to thicken the beats, and to stretch and fold the passage of time. Besides stripping the music down to pure drums and bass, and adding raw percussion, Dubmasters introduced counter-rhythms by multiplying the beats through echo and reverb while splicing in what the producer Bunny Lee called “a whole heapa noise.” And by abruptly dropping guitars, snares, hi-hats and bass in and out of the mix, they created a virtual analogue of the tripping, constantly shifting effects of West African polymetric drumming. Though the hallucinogenic effects of dub are usually attributed to its “spacey” effects and the role of ganja in both its production and consumption, the almost

psychic pleasures of the music also arise from its silly-putty beats and their ability to yank the rug out from under your deeply ingrained sense of a central organizing rhythm.

By giving flight to the producer’s technical imagination, dub sculpted a sort of science-fiction aesthetic alongside reggae’s crunchy Africentric mythos. As critic Luke Erlich has written, “If reggae is Africa in the New World, dub is Africa on the moon.” Just look at the cover art: Mad Professor’s *Science and the Witchdoctor* sets circuit boards and robot figures next to mushrooms and fetish dolls, while *Scientist Encounters Pac-Man at Channel One* shows the scientist manhandling the mixing console as if it were some madcap machine out of Marvel comics. It’s important to note that in Jamaican patois, “science” refers to *obeah*, that African grab-bag of herbal, ritual and occult lore popular on the island. And as Robert Pelton, author of *The Trickster in West Africa*, points out, the figure of the scientist is not so distant from the spirit of the trickster that runs throughout this tale: “Both seek to befriend the strange, not so much striving to ‘reduce’ anomaly as to use it as a passage into a larger order... like the scientist, the trickster always yokes just *this* world to a suddenly larger world.”

Lee Perry continued to serve as reggae’s trickster king. Not only did he make some remarkably spare and intense forays into dub but he applied dub’s spectral aesthetics to the rest of his increasingly surreal, popular and unorthodox productions. In 1974, the producer built Black Ark Studios, destined to become the launching pad of reggae’s most surreal and moving tunes. A year later, he acquired a demo version of a unique phaser from the US; using it alongside a Roland Space Echo – a primitive drum machine with loads of reverb – Perry whipped up multilayered cakes of noise, polyrhythms, ghostly percussion and sounds lifted from other records. He took advantage of anomalies, especially of his limited four-track. As the producer Brian Foxworthy explains, Perry would fill up the four available tracks and then mix them onto a single track on another machine, freeing up three tracks to add more effects and percussion. Like photocopying a photocopy, each go-around added more noise to the signal, yet the very “decay” of the signal adding a moist, organic depth to the music. It’s a classic example of the trickster’s mischievous relationship to disruption and chaos. As Foxworthy told *Grand Royal* magazine, “Tape saturation, distortion and feedback were all used to become part of the music, not just added to it.”

Black Ark was more than Jamaica’s most innovative studio; it was the visible vehicle of Perry’s passionate otherworldly imagination. Its walls were covered with portraits of Selassie, magazine collages, lions and Stars of David, and visitors would sometimes find Scratch planting records and tapes in the garden.

As Bob Mack writes, “By the mid-70s, Perry’s Black Ark had become the cultural/spiritual center of hip Kingston and birthplace of reggae’s most conscious black-pride anthems, all of which were either written or coaxed out of the artist by Perry (who at that point was beginning to infuse all his productions with the complex set of Christian, African, Arthurian and Jamaican folk references that comprise his current cosmology).” Soon after Haile Selassie died in 1975, Perry and Marley helped reaffirm the faith for millions by cutting the ardent “Jah Lives.”

Even the name of Perry’s studio was archetypal, resonating with any number of prophetic crafts: the Ark of the Covenant, Noah’s craft, Garvey’s Black Star Line – all messianic revisions to those vessels that abducted Africans into slavery. But the Black Star that Perry followed lay in the depths of space. In an interview with David Toop, Scratch discussed Black Ark in such extraterrestrial terms: “It was like a space craft. You could hear space in the tracks. Something there was like a holy vibration and a godly sensation. Modern studios, they have a different set-up. They set up a business and a money-making concern. I set up like an ark.... You have to be the Ark to save the animals and nature and music.”

Perry’s unique fusion of premodern myth and postmodern machines not only shapes his lyrics (in one of his weirdest songs, Perry warns “scavengers,” “vampires” and “sons of Lucifer” that “Jah Jah set a super trap / to capture you bionic rats”), but infuses his technological practice. Exploiting equipment that was archaic even for its day, Perry became a dub alchemist, weaving magnetic tape, wires and circuit boards into the playful web of his magical thinking. Indeed, Perry spoke about his relationship to technology in explicitly animistic terms: “The studio must be like a living thing. The machine must be live and intelligent. Then I put my mind into the machine by sending it through the controls and the knobs or into the jack panel. The jack panel is the brain itself, so you’ve got to patch up the brain and make the brain a living man, but the brain can take what you’re sending into it and live.”

Improvising his cuts on the fly, Perry would whirl like a dervish behind his SoundCraft mixing board, blow ganja smoke directly onto the recording reels, even drink the alcohol used to clean the tape heads when he ran out of Dragon Stout. This erratic behavior came to a head in the late 1970s, when Perry started glimpsing UFOs, kicked anyone with dreadlocks out of the Black Ark, and covered its walls with deranged scatological prophecies. In 1979, during what could generously be called a bout of severely eccentric behavior, Perry trashed and burned his studio, and according to some reports wound up briefly in a mental institution.

The question of Perry’s sanity opens up the tangled relationship between tricks, madness, art and the prophetic imagination, but what is most impor-

tant about Perry and his astounding musical legacy is how they highlight an often ignored strain of New World African culture: a techno-visionary tradition that looks as much toward science-fiction futurism as toward magical African roots. One finds this fusion in the experimental cosmological jazz of Sun Ra, who also pioneered the use of synthesizers and African percussion; in Jimi Hendrix’s “electric church music,” which psychedelized the guitar with feedback and studio effects; in the juicy cosmic technofunk of Parliament-Funkadelic mastermind George Clinton, which, as Cornel West writes in *Semiotext(e)*, “both Africanizes and technologizes Afro-American popular music.” Hip hop music also began with a totally unexpected redeployment of turntable and mixing technology (introduced to the South Bronx by the Jamaican DJ Kool Herc), creating what Tricia Rose in *Black Noise* (1994) calls “an experimental and collective space where contemporary issues and ancestral forces are worked through simultaneously.” Though predominantly secular, hip hop nonetheless hosts an intense sub-genre of rappers who belong to the Five Percent Nation, a street-wise offshoot of the Nation of Islam. In contrast with the worldly concerns of gangsta rappers, acts like Brand Nubian, the Poor Righteous Teachers, Paris and Lakim Shabazz fuse hard-hitting political prophecies, righteous moralizing and bizarre numerology into a forceful amalgam of Black Pride and imaginative Africentric “science.”

This loosely gnostic strain of Afro-diasporic science fiction emerges from the improvised confrontation between modern technology and the prophetic imagination, a confrontation rooted in the alienated conditions of black life in the New World. According to Greg Tate, who sees science fiction as continuing a vein of philosophical inquiry and technological speculation that begins with Egyptian theories of the afterlife, “black people live the estrangement that science-fiction writers imagine.” As Perry’s own scathing protest music proves, the prophetic art that arises from this condition of perpetual exile does not simply “escape” from the pragmatic demands of politics. But neither does it deny the ark of the imagination that lies on the other side of the inner door, a tricky craft capable of navigating through the shadowed valleys of this world, guided by a black star whose very invisibility renders its virtual possibilities infinite.

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ubu chico

Artist Chico MacMurtrie takes robotics
into the realm of the flesh in his
evocative technological performances.

Chico MacMurtrie is an alchemical midwife. He has delivered over 80 robotic creatures from the refuse piles of the decaying industrial age. "I want to create myths with machines reflective of how humans deal with each other and their surroundings," states MacMurtrie, obsessed with the "primacy of motion." He notices "how each human is an element in society as a whole." Observing MacMurtrie observe others is an exercise in visual dynamics. The artist tends to watch people with an inquisitive, acquisitive eye, as though recording the elements of their movement in order to later deliver the motion to his robotic children. "In the similar way [that he observes humans], each of my machines make up a metaphorical element in the society that I have been creating." In his San Francisco workshop, he refits his creatures with post-industrial prostheses – radio waves, pneumatic tubes and computer brains – so that they might enact their potential destiny as performers and provocateurs in his continuing epic allegory of the marriage between man and machine.



What is unique to MacMurtrie's work with machines is his unequivocal organic aesthetic, his philosophical interest in the physiology and psychology of the human being. He is interested in the elegant drama of the body as vessel for all experience and relies on quasi-natural forms to give shape to his creations. His robots clearly retain their hominid, mammalian and organic ancestry as they enact their mechanical dramas. MacMurtrie's ideas and concerns seem inextricably fused to the cyborgian cycles of decay, regeneration and organic evolution. In what could be considered an uncharacteristically "feminine" approach in the generally male-driven world of technological advances. Instead, MacMurtrie uses technology to recycle and harvest each new generation in his pneumatic, febrile family.

"It's my wish to create new situations that are as varied as the individual audience member's primal reaction to the machines I have brought to life – you could say I have womb envy," says the artist.

In the course of elaborate performance events, MacMurtrie and the collaborators that form Amorphic Robot Works, founded in 1992, draw crowds to witness the spectacle of post-biological birth. Metal and plastic humanoid, animal and anthropomorphic forms spasm and lurch into motion, make music, and scratch out expressionist drawings, revealing the awkward and tragic lyricism of man's relationship to machine.

MacMurtrie's audiences often applaud and encourage the awakening of the machines' first movements with the expectation of surprised children, proof of the profoundly evocative event of watching the robot quickening. While the machines seem to function at times on their own volition, MacMurtrie and his co-conspirators remain connected to the machines through technical umbilical cords – vacuum hoses, radio-activated telemetry suits. More recently, man and machine remain in concert through the delicate synaptic symphonies of MIDI encoding – this symbiosis making evident the locus of MacMurtrie's vision – man's inextricable entanglement with the race of machines that have become our millennial progeny.

MacMurtrie's works are both social commentary and mechanico-erotic fairy tale in which the body's essential movements and motivations are intimately





explored. MacMurtrie's language is anthropopathic – that is, he ascribes human sensibilities to nonhuman objects, comfortably superimposing the physical and psychological patterns of the biological world upon the machine world of his making. MacMurtrie says, "I'm really searching for the magic of the body, not to simulate it but to effect alchemy."

Earlier works bear witness to the artist's continuing fascination with organic mysteries. Initially, MacMurtrie made paintings and sculptures, but the conventional form of canvas and frame could not contain the body in motion and the dynamism of its evolutionary flux.

Incorporating film, music and performance, proto-robotic characters began surfacing in his work as figures emerging from skin and earth. As if shedding time, a character called the Subhuman moved through MacMurtrie's experimental films as a Spirit of the Underground, ultimately resurfacing years later as a more evolved being – the acculturated Drawing and Drumming Subhuman robot.

While he investigated new methods of making music, film and sculpture, MacMurtrie also explored the possibility of wearing the skins shed from his paintings, as though fulfilling the need to literally move through the process. Fabricating flesh, he then molted aggregate latex skins in ritualistic performance actions that relied upon physical endurance. The body, challenged and compromised, became transformed through threshold experience and ordeal. In looking at MacMurtrie's earlier performances and films, one can see the extremely important conceptual essence that forms his fascination with robotics – the dynamic and miraculously complex evolution of organisms. In watching MacMurtrie's sculptural cosmos evolve, one senses the artist's urgency to transmit the awesome drama surrounding various biological processes. In electing to bear out his ideas using industrial and post-industrial materials, his narrative embodies a sincere yet ironic message regarding the dangerous game humans have devised in their relationship to the planet, the species and technology. In observing MacMurtrie's metaphors for the fragile body, with its majestic but finite resources and thresholds, the limits of the Earth's resources also becomes evident.

There is a cogent and intuitive continuum that links each of MacMurtrie's projects, revealing a serious, playful and intelligent integrity. His ideas form clear patterns threading the complex fabric of his biotic-robotic universe. As MacMurtrie's robots continue to be intimately and mortally tied to their human counterparts, we recognize the machines suffering the trials of humanity's

vicious and awkward foibles. At the heart of MacMurtrie's narrative lie the secrets of a great mythic macrocosmic machine body with universal appetites for destruction and creation. His research into the mystery is made manifest by the various pneumatic children of his design.

Capturing *Pneuma*

When we arrive *ex utero*, the first survival impulse we have is to breathe, and so when Chico MacMurtrie discovered the potential latent in pneumatics,

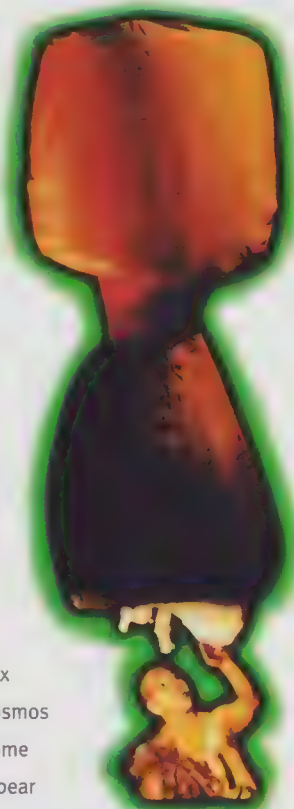
he captured what the Greeks referred to as *pneuma*, the soul or vital spirit. Unfettered by formal training as an engineer, MacMurtrie began to freely explore unusual solutions in order to animate his puppets. Because of his lack of concern for "proper solutions" to engineering and programming problems, MacMurtrie became like one of his conceptual forefathers, Alfred Jarry, inventor of pataphysics or "the science of imaginary solutions and the examination of exceptions." Carefully reviewing the most rudimentary processes of movement, MacMurtrie's sculptures eventually evolved beyond their proto-puppet phase and were gifted with breath, the figures graduating to the status of automata. With pneumatic arteries and metal-tube skeletons, MacMurtrie's robots were soon slouching and stuttering along a reinvented evolutionary trajectory of the artist's imagination.

In the 1940s, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit priest, paleontologist and heretic, was forbidden by papal decree to publish his radical ideas concerning evolution. The scientific community and the church waited until de Chardin's death to reveal the majestic sweep of his ideas concerning the development of man – ideas which are now coming into renewed vogue due to the scientist-priest's metaphysical pre-science regarding the advances of technology. One of the most important ideas put forth in his seminal text, "The

Phenomena of Man," is that it's philosophically and scientifically

sound to assume that the refinement of mind as well as body can and will continue in a process of evolutionary ascension. Sir Julian Huxley explains that, in order to understand de Chardin, "We must infer the presence of potential mind in all material systems by backward extrapolation from the human phase to the biological and from the biological to the inorganic, and the raising of mental potential as being the necessary consequence of complexification."

Similarly, MacMurtrie's pataphysical extrapolation of his machine genealogy displays, in its journey from the human to the biological to the organic and inorganic, a tendency toward higher function.





MacMurtrie explains: “The work is an ongoing endeavor to uncover the primacy of movement. I feel that, as there is a beauty and elegance in movement itself, there is an equally potent experience in watching a machine – human or organic in form – struggling to stand, attempting to throw a rock, or playing a drum. The movement achieved by each machine-sculpture teaches the next generation and becomes an integral addition to the older generation.”

Upon receiving a fellowship at San Francisco’s Exploratorium, a museum of science and technology, MacMurtrie came under the tutelage of Dave Fleming, who he refers to as his collaborator and “patron saint.” Fleming, an engineer, facilitated MacMurtrie’s vision of making his sculptures more kinetically able. The following generations discovered more-complicated aspects of survival; his robots threw rocks, hatched from metal globes, masturbated and made music. The Tumbling Man was one of MacMurtrie’s first creatures activated by a radio telemetry suit. MacMurtrie recalls, in Mark Dery’s recent book *Escape Velocity*, “I become a human narrator interacting with this robot, creating the interesting juxtaposition of a human struggling to make a machine struggle.” He adds that, in creating the Tumbling Man, “I learned a tremendous amount about pneumatics and how to overcome weight and inertia.” Ultimately, MacMurtrie envisioned the Tumbling Man as “a prophesier of peace,” as he actuated the robot’s graceless somersaults across the world, ultimately evoking an empathetic response to our compromised and vulnerable human condition.

The Family of the Subhuman – The Amorphic Evolution

Since their initial invention and popularity, automata seem to be more than narcissistic puppets serving as metaphor in motion; more profoundly, these moving effigies are vessels for psychic and political expressions. They are mechanical mirrors reflecting not our surface but the secret workings beneath the skin. In MacMurtrie’s continuing creative cosmogenesis, the internal systems become increasingly more complex, naturally echoing the surrounding technological evolution of the late 20th century. This amorphous progress includes the gifting of his machines with binary thought code – software and hardware – postmodern metaphors for brain and body. And since his creations have become increasingly more elaborate and needy in their attentions, collaboration has become an integral feature of Amorphic Robot Works. Various individuals bring their interests and abilities to the group, ultimately facilitat-

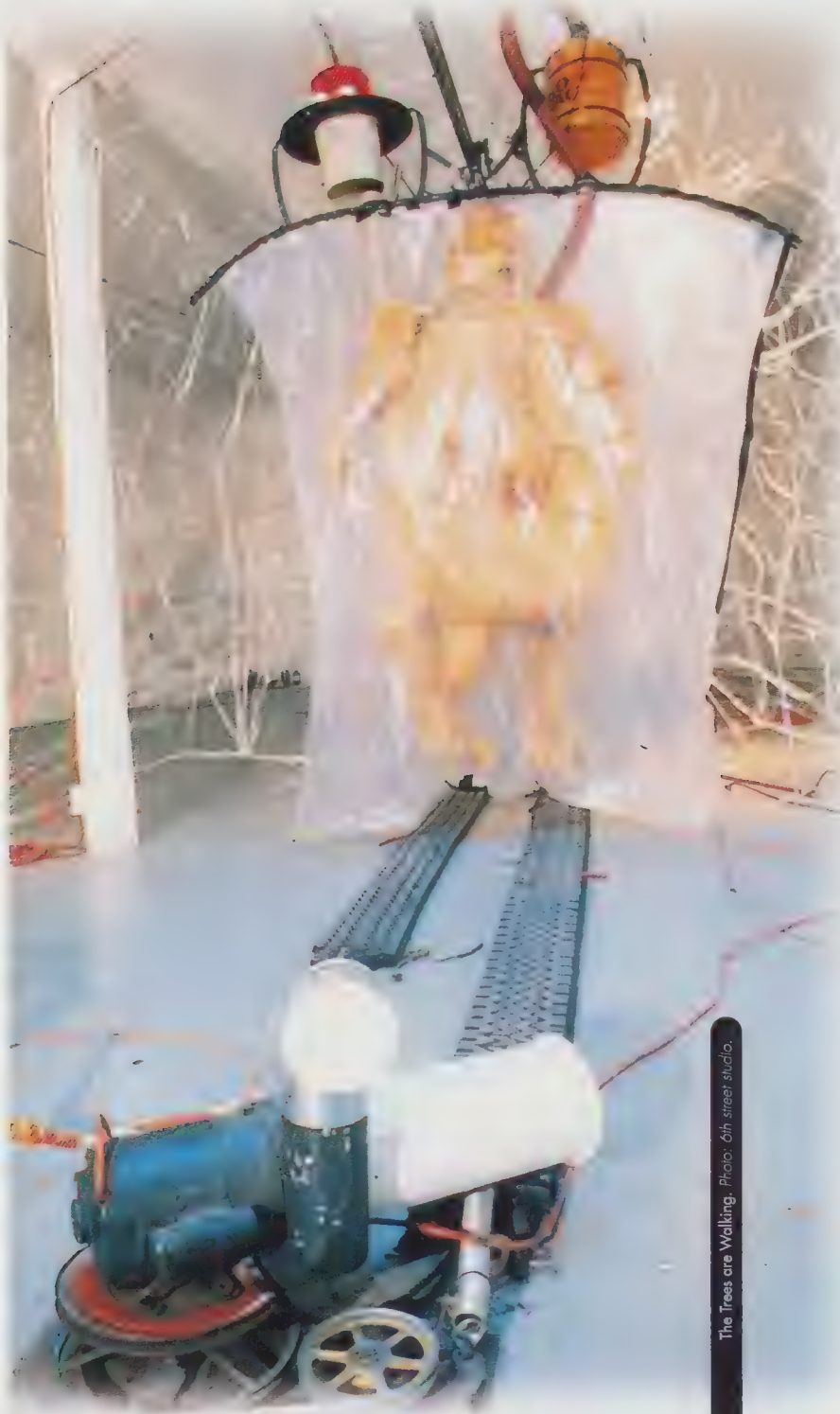
ing the ability of the machines. MacMurtrie has a sorcerer’s charm and keen ability to draw those who can nurture his progeny’s potential. This continual collaboration and positive unification of thought is a natural evolutionary step envisioned by Teilhard de Chardin as mankind moves in its evolutionary ascension toward a more refined sphere of mind.

MacMurtrie’s *The Trees Are Walking* (1990) was his first computer-operated performance/installation. Using entirely recycled hardware and software, super-hacker Rick Sayre accessed an obscure and difficult computer language, Forth, to motivate the machines. This formation of the robotic neuro-logic led to further experimentation and invention. More recently, software/hardware engineers George, Homsy and Stock have developed an elegant MIDI interface that allows for much more mechanico-actuation as well as greater operator freedom. The performer/operators can direct more machines simultaneously, actually playing their motions through Roland piano keyboards as well as the computer. Currently Mark Ruch, a long-time friend of MacMurtrie and one of his first co-conspirators, acts as managing director of the group, while Tim Gubbins serves as technical director. Brian Kane and Mark Scheef are on call as engineers while Jeanette Wernergreen participates as sculptor and technician.

There have been many other collaborators in MacMurtrie’s vision over the years, including biologists, anthropologists, dancers, musicians and performance artists, as well as robot enthusiasts, programmers and hackers. The number of people willing to involve themselves in MacMurtrie’s unfolding drama is a testament to the scope and strength of the artist’s vision and passion – a hunger for expression that literally extends beyond his own physical being, ultimately allowing for expansive collaborative efforts. It seems that, as the group changes and evolves, the participants are learning at an equal rate with the machine, and so, in some organic process, there is a mutual exchange of growth between the humans and their mechanical counterparts.

MacMurtrie’s collaborations with his co-conspirators at Amorphic Robot Works also extends outward in the actual performances. MacMurtrie seeks to engage the audience in willful participation with the robots so that his art is continually challenging not only the borders of the body but the fringes of conventional notions of theater and art.

Since their initial invention and popularity, automata seem to be more than narcissistic puppets serving as metaphor in motion; more profoundly, these moving effigies are vessels for psychic and political expressions. They are mechanical mirrors reflecting not our surface but the secret workings beneath the skin.



The Trees are Walking. Photo: Oh street studio.

In describing his latest performance, MacMurtrie writes: "The Amorphic Evolution is a multi-media performance which includes interactive and computer-controlled sound-generating robotic sculptures and an 'organic interactive environment' which encompasses the entire performance and audience." The show, which traveled through Europe for three months, included "idiosyncratic sound-generating robotic sculptures," and humans and machines interacting with each other based on pre-programmed formats. Yet there was allowance for the spontaneous nature of audience participation. One of the central figures, the Super Dog Monkey – a quadruped, though "regressed" to all fours – was the most advanced of the robots, having the greatest mobility and an "on-board computer brain." Other robots in *The Amorphic Evolution* included the Rope Climber and various members of the Amorphic Tribe, who drum, draw and tumble through the spectacle of sound and motion.

Music for the Millennium: The Kali Yuga

Music is often associated with the activity of the automaton. Eighteenth-century models were often designed to perform musical tasks and to write, and essayist Roman Paska observes that music seemed to be one of the creatures' "favorite poles of attraction." Indeed, music has played an enormous part in the evolution of MacMurtrie's work. After nearly three years of effort, collaborators Bruce Darby, with MacMurtrie and Phillip Robertson, author of the robotic score, staged their opera *Trigram*, which featured an orchestra of humanoid and amorphous sculptures interfaced with human dancers and performers. *Trigram* was conceptually centered on the I Ching, the word meaning "the myriad of all things." In this grandly odd opera, the cyclical nature of all life symbolically grouped the machines, ultimately becoming an exploration of birth, death and regeneration. The performance included over 35 machines and 15 human performers, and was lorded over by an imposing 20-foot-tall goddess-figure that opened her metallic ribs and became host to performers during the performance, an arresting reversal of the biblical myth of Eve's formation. Other elements included the Liquid Inseminating Device and the Triple Dripping Fetus, while the Dog Monkey yawped and the Taiko Drummer, String Body and Chime Body played, along with other machines, laying the soundbed for the Kali Yuga: The Age of Iron.

In Hindu mythology, the Kali Yuga is considered the end of the line for civilization as we know it. It is a time of necessary destruction, fire and plague. Built into the dynamic of this mythic devastation is the certainty of regeneration – the Hindu system recognizing ruin as symbiotically linked to regeneration. Images of rebirth married to those of destruction are repeated throughout MacMurtrie's entire body of work. In his installation *The Trees are Walking*, rusted, spidery pneumatic trees drag themselves through a space that enshrines and imprisons a figure called Over Consumption Man, a humanoid



creature whose foam skin expands with greedy gulps of fresh oxygen. Within that same installation, an ominous device spewing packing-tape tumors – appropriately called the Amorphic Cancerous Growth Generating Device – generates metastasized balls of doom. Like human beings, his robots indulge in the excesses of sensual gratification, the art becoming a causal observation on the results of ecological overindulgence upon the world body.

In another installation, *Primitive Behavior Patterns*, initially staged in Japan, MacMurtrie built a Drumming and Drawing Subhuman, the distant ancestor of the original Subhuman form. This pneumatically gifted being was able to learn drumming patterns taught to it by a human collaborator. Following a sequence of MIDI commands as well as random sequences, the Subhuman would turn from his music making and begin drawing with his charcoal finger. According to MacMurtrie, one of the most enduringly fascinating features of the performance was the audience's universal gasp of disbelief when the Subhuman would pause and

“contemplate” his drawing. Seizing on this, MacMurtrie and Robertson programmed other primitive behaviors to engage and seize the audience's imagination.

The machine is actually capable of expressing itself in wonderfully gestural drawings that, MacMurtrie observes, compete with Franz Kline's and Cy Twombly's efforts. The Subhuman contemplates, learns and, above all, creates. Observer/participants become both teachers and witnesses to the fruits of the machine's labors. In drawing, the robot creates artifacts – initial evidence of hominisation, a term coined by Teilhard de Chardin meaning “becoming more truly human.”

In bearing witness to the creative impulse, there is a direct suggestion of the prehistoric stutter that pushed the species of human from an animal focused solely on survival to one accessing the creative mind. Audiences watch the Subhuman, a robotic artist, and its equivalent Lascaux. Simultaneously, MacMurtrie's machines point to the fulcrum of our equal fascination with destruction; some of his unfortunate creatures seem to be limping out of the ruin of Nagasaki or Hiroshima, deformed survivors of the staggering orgy between men and technology.

Though MacMurtrie shares little in common with the manic rants of F.T. Marinetti, there are a few direct links to the speedy epistles from the Futurists, who espoused the development of a new kind of theater for the Machine Age. In an essay entitled “The Synthetic Theater,” Marinetti, the leader of the Futurists, wrote:

“SYMPHONISE THE AUDIENCE'S SENSIBILITIES BY EXPLORING IT, STIRRING UP ITS LAZIEST LAYERS WITH EVERY MEANS POSSIBLE; ELIMINATE THE PRECONCEPTIONS OF THE FOOTLIGHTS BY THROWING NETS OF SENSIBILITY BETWEEN STAGE AND AUDIENCE; THE STAGE ACTION WILL INVADE THE ORCHESTRA SEATS, THE AUDIENCE.”

MacMurtrie seems to have discovered an effective means of tossing a web of experience around his audience and collaborators. The sympathetic and wondrous creatures that people his

Amorphic Tribe are sexualized robots with appetites, failings and awkward strivings. They clumsily tumble and climb along the path of evolution, striving to grow more intelligent, seemingly yearning to express themselves with widening ranges of motion and freedom. MacMurtrie's robots procreate and die, and are motivated by the very spark that drives both them and their human *Döppelgangers*: *Pneuma* – breath of the spirit.

MacMurtrie continues to work at a feverish pace in his shop, creating techno golems, creatures that have become the bearers of humanity's projected desires and fears. The evolving members of MacMurtrie's clan partake of and forsake the excesses of human destruction and waste, as well as participate in the ultimate generosity – the drama of regeneration via robot birth. —

The performance included over 35 machines and 15 human performers, and was lorded over by an imposing 20-foot-tall goddess-figure that opened her metallic ribs and became host to performers during the performance, an arresting reversal of the biblical myth of Eve's formation. Other elements included the Liquid Inseminating Device and the Triple Dripping Fetus...



The Amorphic Evolution. Photo: Doug Aedesko

Massey Residence, Los Angeles. Side section view

MASSEY RESIDENCE. @ (W) LOS ANGELES, CA. © 1995 COR-TEX / NEW M. DENARI, ARCHITECT
COMPUTER MODELING by: ANDREW WAISLER / PROPELLERHEAD DESIGN



1995
COR-TEX
SYNTHOGRAPHICS



City of Sorts

The architectural philosophy of Neil M. Denari redresses the mythologies of such cities as Los Angeles and Tokyo.

Texas-born, Los Angeles-based architect Neil M. Denari has earned a reputation as an architectural visionary despite the fact that he has built only a handful of projects. Denari's utopian, computer-designed, technologically driven work has developed a cult following among design cognoscenti over the last 10 years. At long last he is beginning to attract the attention of a larger public – receiving a commission to undertake a master plan for the Arlington Museum of Art in Texas this year.



But Denari is no ordinary architect. His domain is not the average architect's realm of small suburban house additions, budgetary afflictions and builder's hassles. Denari is a philosopher architect, and he operates in a world full of enigma, paradox and tension. In Denari's world, architecture is implicated in the complex machinations of global power distributions, ever-advancing technologies and the tectonic cultural shifts at work in our cities. He describes the urban world as a dynamic empty/full binary system. Within this system, social or cultural factors combine with urban or architectural situations like a series of city-scaled open or closed switches. According to Denari, the parameters of this dynamic relationship vary from city to city and from culture to culture. Contemporary urban life in dense but sprawling cities like Tokyo, where Denari has recently built an art and architecture gallery, closely conforms to a culturally "empty"/physically "full" binary model while the vast development tracts of new world cities like Los Angeles describe a physically "empty"/culturally "full" condition.

Denari's architecture reminds one of the short-lived Futurist movement, and his interest in the language of the machine – whether mechanical or digital – seems to extend the Futurists' radical polemic and critique of technology. Denari has little interest in a purely functionalist architecture and his appropriation of technological imagery has as much to do with the symbolic content of the machine and its analogies to our bodies as it has to do with his critique of the modernist myth of mechanical efficiency and technical honesty. During the mid to late '80s, Denari's designs were distinguished by a precisely calibrated and engineered "machine-architecture," delineated more often than not in the obsessive style of an engineering drawing. His proposals from this period for libraries, houses and even a monastery obsessively reiterated a machine aesthetic or mechanistic inflection. These early architectural projects, filled with variously folding or unfolding mechanical arms and legs, and large shell-like spaces that resembled over-scaled machine housings for the body, could have easily described Marinetti's dream of the metalized human figure extending itself into the cold future of the mechanical age – a vision that preceded Donna Haraway's cyborg-human by some 70 years. More recently, the machine aspects of Denari's work have dissolved into an interest in the fuzzier aspects of contemporary culture and digital technology. His latest projects have taken on an almost soft, pregnant or even blobby quality. Increasingly, his architectural work is losing its resemblance to the implements of the machine age and now seems to describe the smooth flows of the information world on an urban scale. Two recent projects in Japan, an entry in the Kansai National Library competition and a small gallery in Tokyo, utilize smooth, seamless geometries to connect disparate spaces and assist pedestrian flow. The eminent architectural historian and critic Kenneth Frampton has observed that Denari's projects inhabit "a modern world which, in the last resort, has to be seen as the domain of anxiety and pain." Indeed, Denari's view of technology seems hardly optimistic at times; it is occasionally somewhat tragic and,

to the uninitiated, probably pathological. Certainly, Denari's very personal interest in the machine seems to resemble an obsessive-compulsive condition that can only be resolved or soothed by his tireless architectural imaginings. Aaron Betsky, curator of architecture and design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has labeled Denari an "Ahab searching for the great white whale of architecture," going on to state that he has substituted "danger, obsession and sheer noise for the soothing platitudes of culture... in [the] self-destructive search for self." Denari's architectural thinking is closer to the sensibilities of

writers like J.G. Ballard and William S. Burroughs than it is to the shiny, generally optimistic dreams of science fiction. In fact, Denari emphatically denies any interest in a sci-fi reading of his work, and he has repeatedly stressed that he works in the terrain of the present and not the imagined fields of the future.

Like Ballard and Burroughs, Denari's vision of the future is probably already with us here in the present. By Denari's account, his architecture is merely a reworking of conditions and environments that already surround us. He has repeatedly argued that he is unconditionally disinterested in adopting the defiant, nihilistic pose of the 20th century avant-gardist, preferring instead to see himself as an infiltrator or instigator working within the folds of the normative, prevalent everyday. However, despite his protestations, it may well be

that Denari is presenting us with the image of a new world heroically delivered, phoenix-like, from the wreckage of modern industrial culture.

Peter Zellner: *Can you explain your empty/full binary and how it applies to your work?*

Neil M. Denari: For example, LA is built out of endless grids and infrastructures. It is seemingly devoid of the qualities of traditional urbanism; density, human scale and history. We could say that, urbanistically speaking, LA is an "empty" city. But, LA's tectonic "emptiness" is countered by an incredibly "full" cultural condition in which fluid elements like moving automobiles, free-wheeling finance, media production and physical beauty reach such a fever point that different sorts of densities are restored in the face of vacuousness. So LA is also a "full" city.

Aaron Betsky, curator of architecture and design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has labeled Denari an "Ahab searching for the great white whale of architecture," going on to state that he has substituted "danger, obsession and sheer noise for the soothing platitudes of culture... in [the] self-destructive search for self."

In Tokyo, the traditional urban structures – building mass, requisite monuments, neighborhoods and effective mass transportation – are played out rather clearly, giving us a "full" reading of a city. But, in Tokyo the social and cultural structures seem to be robotic and lacking spontaneity – and hence are "socially empty." The Japanese are very open about their aspirations toward regularity and their fear of disharmony. It is only after business hours that Japanese youth culture can begin to dismantle the sterility of the daily working routine (for instance, the transformation of the proper young office lady – uniformed tea server to super-hot Roppongi club girl – comes to mind). So it's possible to see the binary even in the concept of personal identity... there's no schizophrenia here, just another structure! My project for a Vertical Weekly Mansion, essentially a stack of nine one-room efficiency apartments, attempts to make an expression out of repetition, to give a special place to the itinerant salaryman or the office lady. It's on an 8.5 x 5.7 meter site, so it's very small, but at the top and basement levels are two bars named Blow-Up 1 and Blow-Up 2 (my Antonionian reference to the ennui and routine of getting drunk in Tokyo!). As a Westerner, we get to see our so-called "full" lives played out in the pathos of a culture of appropriation... but this is why I love Japan and the Japanese so much. What is over-the-top for them usually becomes Zen for me! So, I want to clearly respond to the empty/full binary through my work because I think that, at least in these two cities, the play between the physical urban landscape and the attendant social and technological orders produces a conflagration of meanings and irresolutions that I can address through architecture. I am trying to develop my ambivalence about these urban and cultural conditions into a productive emotion. Instead of being paralyzed by these conditions or weighed down by their logic, I want to work with them productively.

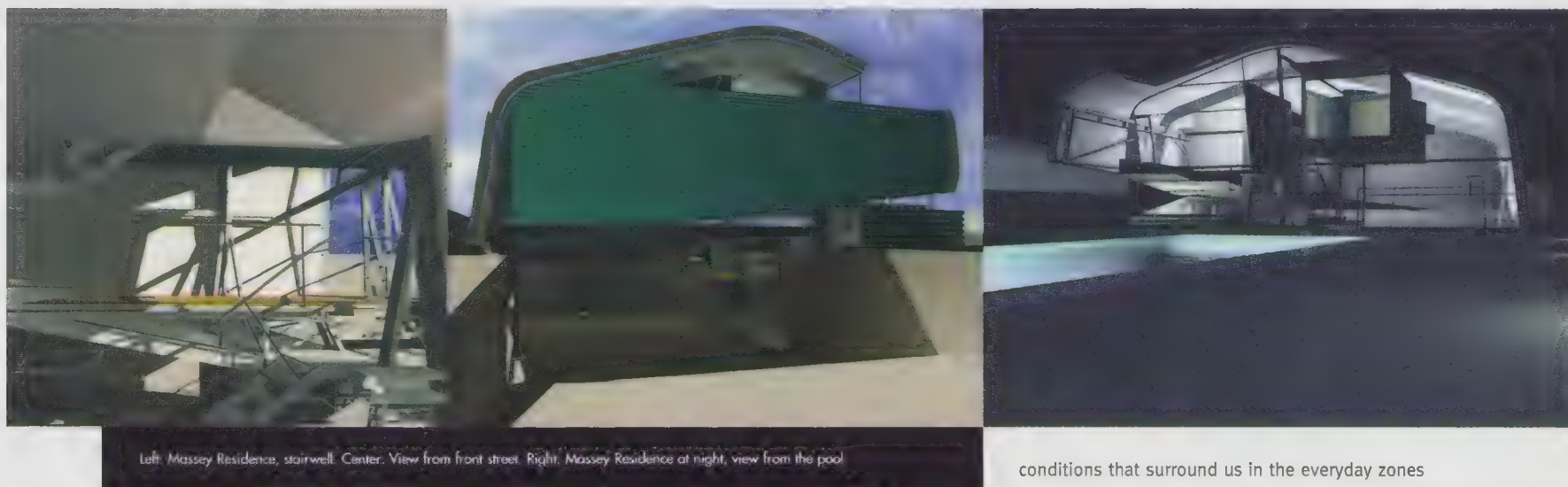
The icons and logos that drive the global marketplace and transmit the exchange-value of everyday objects – shoes, stereos, laptops, Slurpees, T-shirts – may be seen as an ever-expanding series of socio-cultural combinations and recombinations. McDonald's can tailor its menu for specific markets and cultures – McUdon noodles in Tokyo or McEscargots in Paris – but essentially the Golden Arches and their allure, their "desire value," remain fixed. Is it possible for architecture, an art firmly caught up in the mystique of creation, to begin to address these issues? Traditional attitudes towards the "mystique" of artistic creation, as you refer to it, are caught up in various motivations. The *masterpiece*, for instance, often openly advertises the private emotion of the artist in order to lend the work in question the allure or imprint of auteurship. What I am more interested in is how, or through what systems, a work or a specific symbol can speak to an audience and, further, to which audience?

When I think about material – and informational – production, the basic instru-

ment of capitalism, I see money as a currency that, especially today, is not one of difference. Money does not operate like specific, localized verbal language. It is shared. Despite pounds in the UK, baht in Thailand, and yen in Japan, cash translates into numerical equivalences that mean essentially the same thing everywhere. For me, a logo like the Golden Arches is essentially the same thing: a diagram of the global capitalist condition. The logo speaks to the largest audience possible, becoming part of an everyday, hegemonic global language. The fixity of identity that the logo overcomes at times displaces local differences. It is consistent despite physical or cultural displacement. I like to view architecture in a similar light. For instance, the Japanese rebuild many shrines and gates

map is found in a Greek word for a sheet, not for information. My conclusion is that a map is two things: One, it is an inherently bendable surface, since it's a sheet; and two, it is a surface for the inscription of information and/or symbols.

The space I built uses a continuously bending smooth surface that has logos and symbols floating on its green surface, which is itself a kind of artificial super-natural color. The particular shade of green is meant to remind us that green-ness is the fashionable code for nature today. So, I see the space as a work about interpreting such normative cultural codings. What I am really trying to create is an architecture that generates difference out of the repetitive



Left: Massey Residence, stairwell. Center: View from front street. Right: Massey Residence at night, view from the pool

every 20 years. Conventional wisdom about history tells us that everything is bound to events and artifacts – nothing can overcome the “authentic” movements of time or their effects, and history can not be reconstructed. But for the Japanese, any historical structure can be rebuilt, reminding us that the object doesn't mean as much as the code of its own origin. We don't ask how old the wood is, we look into the meaning that it carries. I think that acknowledging this condition is probably the first step in overcoming it, or at least in working productively with it.

For the Interrupted Projections project that was completed last September in a Tokyo art and architecture space called Gallery MA, I developed a concept I call the Worldsheet – which is different from the string theory term of the same name. In my office I have a world map on the wall, which I stare at quite often. I like to think that landforms represented on this map don't really tell us much about the world any more. I think the world is actually made up of many layers of flowing phenomena that cover the entire global surface. The origin of the

these differences can be developed into a new set of viable codes or spatial axioms for making architecture.

The increasing globalization of local cultures by financial or political power structures and technologies can be described as a relentless process of translating nationhood, self and community into a transnational, negotiable financial language. The local and specific are being demographically pinpointed into one consumer zone after another. Coca-Cola Inc. claims in the 1990s that, “We are not a multinational, we are a multilocal.” These multilocal regions now override national boundaries through the flexible commodities of images and informations. In light of the creation of this seamless global condition, are the center/periphery debate and the empire/colony condition increasingly untenable?

I am generally not a cynic, so it would be hard for me to think that Coca-Cola's re-localizing rhetoric is really an insidious political shenanigan; that advertising voice may very well just be an affect of boardroom slickness. On the whole, however, I agree with others that the center/periphery debate is dead, and that



Top Left: Gallery MA, courtyard.
 Top Right: Gallery MA, entrance.
 Bottom Left: Gallery MA, floor view.
 Bottom Right: Gallery MA, aerial view.

that binary has been shattered by the polycentralized – rather than decentralized, I would say – spaces of many peripheries. It could even be possible that peripheries are arising with absolutely no center of reference!

If collusion, co-optation, monopolies and mergers still seem to be operating as capitalist strategies, there is also a new, more-mobile scale of operations at work that is engendered by pure technical knowledge more than physical size. These operations occur in a new space freed from the heavy weight and oppression of the corporate and the governmental. But I am still very interested in tracking the movements of the behemoths of the technical world and their effect on cities. For instance, Intel is set to build a one billion dollar computer-chip factory just north of Fort Worth, Texas. Lockheed-Martin, also located in Fort Worth, is going up against Boeing Seattle for a \$200 billion contract to build the Joint Strike Fighter. If Lockheed gets the contract, it would

suddenly turn the Fort Worth region into a powerful zone for mainstream and military-based technological production. What interests me is how such fluid movements of capital


are re-articulated in urban space as heavy but seemingly instantaneous new suburban fields.

Last summer, we submitted a scheme for the National Library of Japan, a huge installation in a new town called Kansai Science City. It seemed strange to put all the books and information for an entire country in a relatively remote place. Yet somehow I came to believe that the motivation was to primarily serve the techno-scientific corporate research culture of the area. Unlike the Library of Congress, a centralized bastion of accessible knowledge, the Japanese version is a quasi-corporate machine vessel in the landscape. With my entry for the competition, the architectural interest was in reinvesting a sense of accessibility in the idea of a library by enlarging or super-scaling some of my earlier Worksheet concepts from the Gallery MA project.

The code or axiom of this surface is that it's a diagram for smooth flows of people and information/symbols. That's why I've tried to eliminate corners or seams in the geometry where ever I could.

The subtexts of socio-ecological degradation and the impending biosphere "crash" that scientists like David Suzuki have predicted and social critics/auteurs like Michelangelo Antonioni and J.G. Ballard have vigorously folded into their practices as defining leitmotifs (vis Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* and *Red Desert*, or Ballard's *Rushing to Paradise* and *Crash*) seem to interest you. How do these themes factor into your practice as an architect?

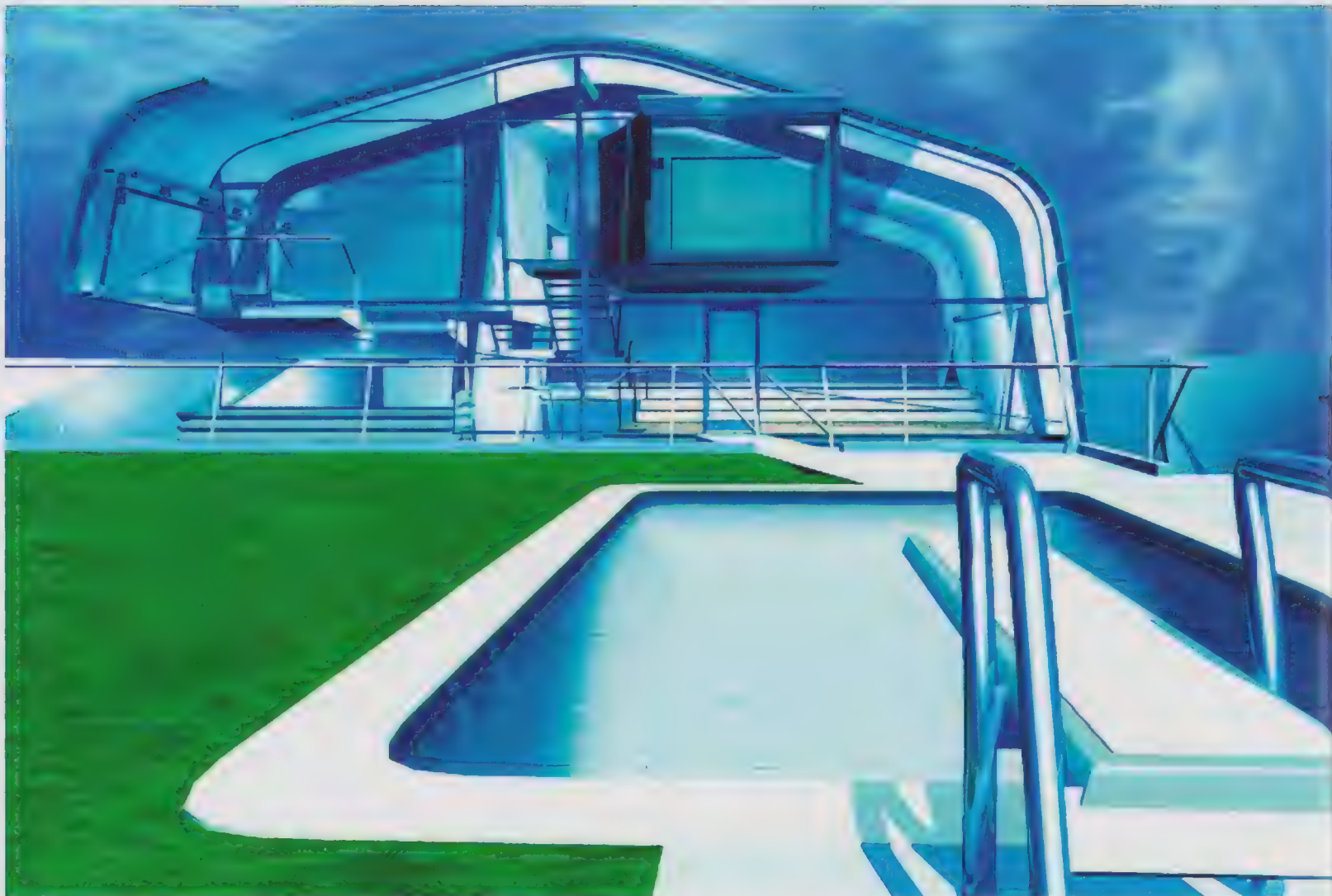
The PC finger is usually pointed at technology as the culprit in the ecological dilemma. In his introduction to *The Systems of Objects*, Baudrillard identifies the technological plane as an abstract surface above the "spoken" or accepted plane of meanings of objects. He reminds us how unconscious we are of the techno-



The top photograph shows the exterior of the Kansai Library's roof stack. The building features a prominent, curved, cantilevered upper section with a glass facade. The words "KANSAI LIBRARY" are visible in large, red, three-dimensional letters on the upper level. The structure is supported by a series of vertical columns. The sky in the background is a pale, hazy blue.

Top: Kansai Library, exterior of roof stack.
Below: Kansai Library, entrance ramps.





50-CAL APHORISMS

1. Los Angeles has its beauty, though like the facial make-over, it wears thin as it is exposed to our inspection.
2. Realism doesn't seem to exist in Los Angeles except when cataclysm reminds us of it, and even then, the event-spectacle surprises us with its ease of being captured by the media.
3. To feel the sublime in Los Angeles, we must look beyond the world in front of us to the glaucous paradise constructed inside our own heads.
4. If a car is a wreck, then even the most beautiful driver will be subjected to the stares of pity or scorn seen through the filter of such ugliness.
5. Architecture's last breath in the West is the life-guard tower. After a 5,000-mile long swim, it emerges in Tokyo as a 50-storey tower.
6. The thing about palm trees is that they try so hard to be like other trees, but in the end they exist as icons of splendor rather than as devices of nature.
7. In the ski slopes and golf courses of Southern California are the geometries of pleasure and frustration, a mixture likely to be matched only in the privacy of one's own bedroom.
8. Lost on most visitors to Los Angeles is the fact that it is a city, not a plastic prop waiting to be destroyed by the cynicism of the uninitiated.
9. The terrifying possibility of an 8.0 earthquake does not rival the fear of a Hollywood bomb.
10. Buildings in Los Angeles take on the aura of history when they are renovated for the third time.

— Neil M. Denari



logical reality of objects. In use, technology is rather transparent, but as spent icons, it is the site of guilt or political hindsight. It no longer seems abstract to us.

I am close to the views of Antonioni or Ballard in the sense that they understand that technology is a part of culture that defines its intentions very well, whether for pleasure, destruction or any other function. Their work is not heavily judgmental on the surface. However, as they expose the technological landscapes around us, it is impossible not to read subtle prejudices at work. This is where ambivalence becomes such a powerful emotion. I can feel the corrupted optimism of this century, of space-age ideals that have mutated into provisional and momentary flashes of beauty. What is interesting is that they have portrayed the disaster as more a

product of our own paranoias than of machines gone wrong. The ignorance or pathologies that arise from our relations to technology and the landscape are indeed very interesting to me – mostly because they articulate the persistent and antagonistic notion that we are somehow merely attempting to pit our bodies against nature in order to survive. I think Ballard's *High Rise* states this clearly.

My point of view surrounding the eco-crisis radiates from a particularly architectural understanding of buildings as emblems of blind authority and rampant capitalist misconduct with the land. If architects can't or won't confront this fear, then we won't be able to practice architecture. Issues such as artificiality and the built domain are of course central to architecture, so I am trying to argue that technology is not only the guilty party in the eco-crisis, it is also a way out of that crisis – whether through better farming techniques, cleaner industry, more-organized infrastructure, or digital environments as alternative energy savers. So, I think my strategy in dealing with ecology is aware and reasonable. I would argue that my buildings are environmentally responsive in terms of sun and temperature control, air movement, and the photosynthetic

and cleansing possibilities of various new technologies. Technology is at the root of all cultural and natural transformations, and I am attempting to articulate through my work a non-antagonistic relationship between “silver-mechanical” and “green-natural” forces.

There is a quality to much of your cultural interests that I would term Pop, in the classically American tradition. Your comments about the logo and the language of mechanical or digital repetition bring Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons immediately to mind. However, recent attempts to draw popular culture into a dialogue with architecture, at least in America, have usually resulted in kitschy architecture of the worst order. How do you feel about the uneasy alliance between architecture, an ostensibly “high” art, and popular culture, publicly perceived “low” art?

This question is an inevitable one, perhaps because of the subject matter I am dealing with. My interest in popular culture comes from a sort of hyper-awareness of the world around me, which I like to cultivate. Although I may be seen as an architect who has crafted a vision of form and spatiality that is “personal” or even privately poetic in some sense, my architecture is derived from a synthesis of a world of aesthetic, technological, social and graphic phenomena that interest me. Various languages are deployed in each of these zones of production that contain aspects of both popular and private cultures.

My work, I think, speaks to both private and popular codes, and as such, it attempts to develop a spatial language in which these codes can converge. I would say that my architectural conventions are undoubtedly private ones, and that the graphics ones are more immediately understood publicly. What I hope is that the graphic aspect will help explain the architectural codes, the same way text and image go together.

The Pop art that you refer to, produced by Warhol and Koons, deals primarily with irony as its critical lever as a specifically commercial recontextualizing strategy that has its origins in Marcel Duchamp or Dada. I am certainly not involved, especially in my design work, with concepts of irony or the representation of the mainstream or the banal. I want to implicate and critically use cultural codes in order to push more-extreme ideas, to draw people into my work rather than to be alienated by its formal unfamiliarity. Therefore, I would disagree with you that my work is Pop in that sense. —————

Technology is at the root of all cultural and natural transformations, and I am attempting to articulate through my work a non-antagonistic relationship between “silver-mechanical” and “green-natural” forces.



Tropical Millennium

BY JULIAN DIBBELL

Aliens have landed in Brazil
and can be found via the cult
and cults of Brasília

Thirty miles north of Brasília – the sleek, space-age capital of Brazil – lies a rough-hewn little town called the Valley of the Dawn. And high above this valley, untold miles high, hovers a fleet of vessels from a far-off planet known to its inhabitants as Capela. The fleet's existence is common knowledge in the town below, but is not easily confirmed by standard scientific methods. You could look for the ships all day – the sky is vast and beautiful over these flat, desolate highlands – but you wouldn't see them. Nor would radar pick them up, nor radio, nor satellite reconnaissance. Contact, in short, must be made through means other than those provided by the material world. And here in the valley, it is made at least twice a day, 365 days a year.

The secret behind such regular contact lies not so much in technology as in a steady supply of technicians: Out of the valley's roughly 5,000 residents, all but a handful are active psychic mediums. A demographic like that would not be easy to come by in most places in the world, but Brasília and its immediate environs are not very much like most places in the world. Brasília sprouted fully formed in the middle of Brazil's otherwise empty Central Plateau just over three decades ago. Planning the city down to its minutest details, Brasília's architects intended it to stand as a monument to technocracy and rational design. But the Brazilian people have turned it into something much more interesting: They have made it a beacon of the irrational, investing the city with a millennial significance that approaches that of Jerusalem or Mecca and draws the mystically inclined from all over Brazil. The Valley of the Dawn is only one out of hundreds of local sects, communities and other visionary gatherings, but as the best known of them, it can count on a continuous influx of enthusiastic believers. So that when the calls go out for the Ceremony of the Burning Star each afternoon at 12:30 and 2:30 (with a 6:30 session added on weekdays), there are always at least a dozen or so mediums available to participate, and often as many as a hundred. They gather at the edge of town in an area that, with its elaborate artificial waterworks and brightly painted abstract monuments, takes monumental modernism on a long detour through the aesthetic of the miniature-golf course. Likewise, the vestments of the group hover between the solemnity of the Roman Catholic Church and a Dungeons-and-Dragons players' convention. Men (or "jaguars," as they are known in the often bewildering mythology of the valley) come wrapped in a floor-length cape that rises up into an ear-high, Barnabas Collins-issue collar. Women ("nymphs") get colorful dresses that vary according to storybook notions of historical reference, a toga hinted at here, a medieval wimple there. Accessories abound – ceremonial swords and lances, badges and medallions stamped with obscure symbols. Beneath the watchful eyes of a two-storey-tall cutout image of Mother Yara, Amerindian water goddess and patron spirit of this ceremony, the celebrants slowly march to their positions along the edge of the "Burning Star" – a 100-foot-wide pool of water shaped like a Star of David. An elliptical, antenna-like sculpture juts up from the center of the pool, and at the points of the star, loudspeakers blare out jaunty pre-recorded hymns followed by a droning, Indo-Afro-Assyrian-inflected liturgy that the congregation echoes in hardy unison: "Oh Simiromba of the Great East of Oxalá, in the Enchanted

World of the Himalayas, prepare my way, illuminate my spirit, so that I may go forth fearless in the final advance of a new age....”

Contact has commenced. A psychic uplink to the interplanetary fleet has been established, and some of the worshippers now show signs of possession, convulsing and moaning softly. They are absorbing Earth’s negative spirits, the ones that converge on world capitals like Brasília, the ones that spur the leaders of nations on to strife and corruption, and they are transmitting them to the ships, where they will be converted into positive energy and beamed back in a well-defined current that flows down through the antenna in the middle of the Burning Star and on to the sect’s temple in the center of town. From there, the energy will be transported back to the city by the nightly stream of Brasília’s broken souls that passes through the temple in search of succor.

The valley is a kind of cosmic power plant – in other words, the administrative center of a vast, techno-metaphysical circulatory system, with the capital’s great reservoir of bad vibes at one end and the space fleet’s transforming purity at the other. Where the cycle starts and where it terminates, however, is hard to judge. A safe guess, ventured at a safe remove from Brasília’s mythic atmosphere, would say the ships are the end-product, conjured by the seething mass of hopes and disappointments Brasília represents. But from the shores of the Burning Star, no guess looks safe, and it’s just as easy to believe Brasília itself is the conjured object, reinvented daily by the aliens.

Efigênia Dias Bicalho sees auras. She sees them without even trying to, and in the midst of conversation she may pause to comment on the shape and color of yours, as if she were simply taking note of some item of clothing you’d put on that day. She has seen auras all her life. She has also seen entities from other dimensions, and the vessels they travel in. And the future. And this isn’t all she’s seen.

Efigênia lives in a suburb of Brasília now, but she spent her childhood in the southeastern state of Minas Gerais with her grandmother Rosa, a seven-foot-tall, 100-year-old black woman of legendary psychic abilities. In the early ’50s, Efigênia recalls, their home was visited with some frequency by a man named Juscelino Kubitschek. Kubitschek was a powerful local politician, and he came to Efigênia’s home for spiritual and tactical guidance from Grandma Rosa – not an especially unlikely scenario in a country whose national religion is two parts official Catholicism and many parts African-flavored spiritism.

Time after time, Kubitschek came to Rosa to unload the typical anxieties of a

career politico, but one day in 1953 he appeared with an ear-to-ear grin on his face and a parchment scroll tied up with yellow ribbon in his hand. When he unrolled the parchment before Efigênia and her grandmother, they saw the outlines of a wondrous and alien-looking city. Kubitschek told them that these plans had been dictated to him on a recent night by seven extraterrestrial beings. And Grandma Rosa told him that one day he would preside over the building of a great city just like this one.

Which, as any Brazilian schoolchild can tell you, he did. Elected president of Brazil in 1956, Kubitschek threw his weight behind a long-moldering plan to move the capital from Rio de Janeiro to the heart of the nation. Construction work began in 1957, and by the time Kubitschek left office in 1961, the world’s newest metropolis was open for business. Years later, Efigênia

Dias Bicalho finally laid eyes on the city, but the moment was anticlimactic.

“I’d already seen it all,” she says, “on the parchment. I wasn’t the least bit startled.” Maybe she wasn’t. But few people who know Brasília can claim such equanimity for their first encounter. Far more typical was the response of Yuri Gagarin, Soviet cosmonaut and first man in space, who visited Brasília in the ’60s and came away apparently more unsettled than he’d ever been in orbit. “I feel,” he told the president after his first day in the city, “as if I had stepped onto the surface of another planet.”

Presumably, Gagarin’s remark was taken as praise. Brasília seems intended, after all, to give the impression of having been built neither by nor for mere earthlings. A race of hyperintelligent Volkswagens, perhaps, or aliens who speak a language made up entirely of Euclidean axioms, might be expected to feel at home in this sidewalk-poor zone of perfectly circulating asphalt arteries and relentlessly clean lines of design – but not any species as puny and unkempt as homo sapiens.

Thirty years after Brasília’s inauguration, however, the built-in alienation effects have lost much of their edge. The strangeness is as strange as ever, but it’s grown cozily dated, and the first-time visitor’s otherworldly head-trip now mingles with the distinct sensation of having stepped into an episode of *The*

The huge television broadcast tower dominating the downtown landscape was designated a transmitter of psychic as well as electromagnetic energies, and the twin skyscrapers of the national congress turned out to be a kind of urban Stonehenge...

Jetsons. Brasília's endless vistas and obsessively logical layout (not to mention its cheery devotion to the private automobile) conjure a future that went way out of style sometime around the first world oil crisis, a future in which resources are limitless and rational central planning is the answer to every social problem. As futures go, it's got its charms – but then, so do bad '50s sci-fi movies.

Brasília, in other words, has come into its own as a masterwork of retro kitsch, still gamely proclaiming itself the shape of things to come while the past into which it was born cloaks it like a fake leopard-skin wrap. The smell of that past hangs everywhere, but for a really good whiff, nothing beats the pharaonic tomb of Juscelino Kubitschek, a marble-plated, trapezoidal traffic island rising amid eight lanes of superhighway slicing through the city center. Just outside the entrance sits Kubitschek's trusty Galaxie 500, enshrined in a glass case, and inside the tomb, a steady Muzak flow bathes the president's mortal remains in the hits of his city's heyday: "Love Me Tender," "Strangers in the Night," "Michelle," the theme from *A Man and a Woman*.

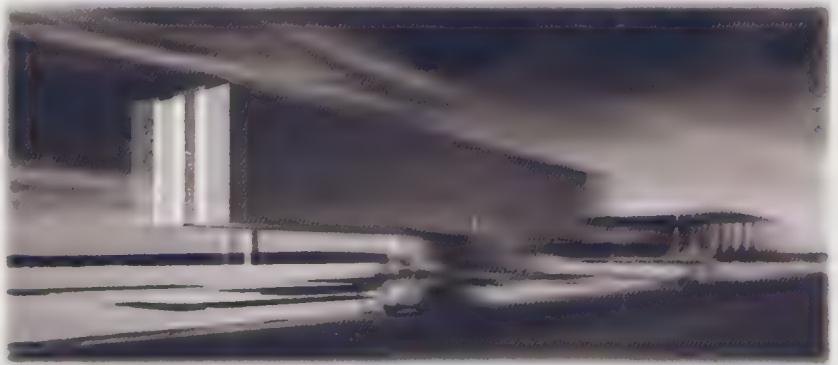
But the centerpiece of this time capsule is the photographic series that runs along one wall, like hieroglyphs inside a pyramid, telling the story of the ruler's heroic acts: Kubitschek turning on a newly constructed hydroelectric plant; Kubitschek in a tractor clearing vegetation for his new capital; Kubitschek among maps and graphs, presenting to the public Brazil's first "Global Development Plan," the scheme that lay behind all this activity.

The plan bristled with projects and target quotas, and the linchpin of them all was Brasília. Construction of the city would, if all went by the book, jump-start key industrial sectors and galvanize the economy straight into the First World. Likewise, Brasília's design, entrusted to a pair of hardcore local Bauhausers, would plant the elegant efficiency of modernist architecture deep in the heart of Brazilian culture. In one hard, swift tug, Brasília was going to yank the nation into full-fledged modernity. The plan sounded scientific enough, but in fact, what drove it was the logic of the cargo cult: Brasília was a magic spell, an overgrown amulet held out to the gods of development in the hope that they would rain down the riches of advanced capitalism on poor, messed-up Brazil. It was powerful magic, to be sure – bold and theatrical and verging on national self-hypnosis. But at this late date, the spell's success is open to debate. Brazil remains wedged as solidly as it ever was in an interesting but not-so-comfortable limbo between the First and Third Worlds, and there has been speculation that the enormous sums spent on building Brasília jump-started nothing more than the non-stop triple-digit inflation and massive foreign debt that, in the decades that followed, helped keep Brazil in that limbo.

But if the rational plans of Brasília's authors failed to bear fruit, the seeds of

magical thinking hidden in them fell on fertile ground and thrived. To the quiet bemusement of the architects, who strove to install in their designs only the purest functionalism, the public began almost immediately to scrutinize Brasília for secret messages. Like clouds on the horizon, or tea leaves at the bottom of a cup, the city's abstract forms suggested concrete objects and meanings. The very layout, it was soon and famously discovered, had the shape of a jetliner – an appropriate symbol for Brasília's modernizing project, and a handy one as well, since it could be seen as landing, taking off, or crashing, depending on one's sympathies.

Over the years, the art of reading Brasília deepened and took on increasingly mystical dimensions. More symbols were uncovered, power points were located. The huge television broadcast tower dominating the downtown landscape was designated a transmitter of psychic as well as electromagnetic energies,



and the twin skyscrapers of the national congress turned out to be a kind of urban Stonehenge, positioned so that on the anniversary of Brasília's inauguration the sun rises precisely between the two buildings.

Eventually, a book was written, by a free-floating professor of Egyptology named Iara Kern, cataloging the various cabalistic, numerological and Tarot-related codes inscribed in the city's structures. On sale at the official bookstore at Kubitschek's tomb, the book leaves no slab of concrete unturned, noting, for instance, that the three-leveled central bus station can be read as a horizontal H, symbolizing mortal man (*homem*, in Portuguese) and the three levels of his consciousness (id, ego, superego), while the legislative buildings are clearly an erect H, standing, of course, for immortal man.

Control of the city's meaning having decisively passed out of its authors' hands, stripping them of their very authorship was a small step, one that Professor Kern's book takes at a flying run. At the root of her pack-rat's nest of arcane symbologies lies a single sweeping premise: that the true creative force behind Brasília was neither the architects nor, strictly speaking,

Kubitschek himself, but rather the great pharaoh Akhenaton, reincarnated in the body of the Brazilian president. Kern has compelling evidence on her side. How else, after all, does one explain the strikingly pyramidal structure of the municipal electric-company headquarters and other key buildings? And while it might be argued that Kubitschek looks as much like a cross-wired reincarnation of Cesar Romero and John Belushi as he does like Akhenaton, the physical resemblance is undeniable.

Still, as powerful as these arguments may be, their proofs are at bottom only circumstantial. And those who have seen the truth with their own eyes, as Efigênia Dias Bicalho did on that long ago night of 1953, know that in fact the city's origins cannot be found in Ancient Egypt or anywhere else on Earth: Brasília came to this world from a higher plane, and to a higher plane it is destined to return.

"What I can tell you is this," says Brother Myron, medium in training, his arms folded over a long white robe, his eyes aimed confidently out into the

brilliant light of a tropical Sunday afternoon, "This place is different." "This place is different," he repeats, "and if at one time it was programmed in the spiritual plan that the United States was to be the land of the New Age, since then the collective karma of the US has

been compromised – by excessive participation in military conflicts, by misuse of atomic power – and today everything indicates that the center of activity of the Third Millennium has been shifted to the heart of Brazil. And that center is precisely here, where we are standing at this moment."

Where we are standing is an hour's drive southeast of Brasília, on the steps of a neo-classical temple camped incongruously amid the red dirt and deep greens of the capital's surrounding countryside. Inside the temple, the poor, the pious and the put-upon from near and far consult with a battalion of full-fledged, white-robed mediums possessed by the shades of long-dead Indians and black slaves, who bring healing power from the spirit world and words of wisdom from their lord, Jesus Christ. Outside, scattered around the temple, lie the buildings of a self-sustaining, cashless community of some 600 spiritual seekers – the City of the Universal Spiritualist Eclectic Brotherhood, First Essene Sanctuary of Brazil and the Americas.



The Eclectic City is older than Brasília, but not by much. It was founded in 1956, when the disciples of self-made messiah Master Yokaanam (formerly Lieutenant Oceano de Sa of the Brazilian Air Force) followed him into the wilderness of the Central Plateau, just months before the new capital's construction got underway. Members of the brotherhood like to suggest a causal link between the two events, but if it was part of Yokaanam's plan to bring the national capital along with him when he left Rio de Janeiro, that was merely a small first stage on the way to a much more ambitious goal: to establish here the nucleus of a great, global civilization, ruled by cosmic justice and love.

Yokaanam received the assignment one day in 1944, in the midst of a routine flight over central Brazil, when a mysterious entity appeared to him and told of the glorious destiny that awaited him on the ground directly below. At the time, the young pilot's future plans did not include carving out a life in the middle of nowhere, and he told the mysterious entity as much. The being made no reply, but almost instantly Yokaanam found his plane plunging headlong into a close encounter with the promised land, and when he came to in a hospital bed, he thought better of his reluctance. The very next day, he began preparing for the move.

But it wasn't just the strong-arming of higher powers that gave Yokaanam's project its urgency. Like many people in close contact with the psychic dimensions since then, he'd been informed that the central highlands of Brazil were among the few regions on Earth marked for exemption from the earthquakes, floods and pestilence that were to usher in the coming age of spiritual plenty. And he had it on good authority as well that these end times were fast approaching, in the form of a huge planet, 300 times the size of ours, winging its way silently and invisibly earthwards for a near collision that would sweep the less psychically evolved two-thirds of humanity out into space and set the great transition rolling.

"In those days, this was something a crazy person would say, a nut," says Brother Myron with the cheerful calm that marks his every utterance. "But today, I believe scientists have acquired some information about this planet. NASA itself, if I am not mistaken, now knows about it, and it seems they've even given it a name – Barnard I."

If at times Brother Myron sounds (and, even in his prophet-like raiment, looks) less like a devout spiritualist than like a pocket-protected, factoid-friendly technocrat, that's no surprise, or even much of a contradiction: Before an inner voice summoned him to the Eclectic City four years ago, he trained and worked as an economist, and ultimately the career change wasn't as radical as it might seem. For decades, Brazil's social engineers have been poring obsessively over the economic indicators, looking in desperation for a pathway out of the thrall of chronic semidevelopment and into the sovereign prosperity long



promised by Brazil's abundant natural resources. Myron's quest is not much different, with the notable exception that he has actually found the pathway, and knows that following it is just a matter of waiting, attentively and virtuously, for the cosmic plan to unfold.

And unfold it does. The Master's spirit may have departed his wiry, grey-bearded body over seven years ago, but with every new pilgrim who follows an inner voice to the Central Plateau, Yokaanam's mission comes closer to completion. For those who live in it, the Eclectic City, by its continued existence, proves what Brasília's futuristic grandeur only hints at: One day Brazil will lead the nations of the world, humbling the great northern powers of today. One day New York City, and all the banks Brazil has at one time or another sold its economic soul to for a shot at becoming a player on the world stage, will lie sunken beneath the waves of the cataclysmic leap into the Aquarian Age, while Brasília shines pristine and safe, a haven for the enlightened elite that is gathering there even now. "Yes, you all are the First World," says Myron, aiming a serene smile at his American visitor. "And we here are what you call the Third World. Very well. But one day," and here his serenity strains to suppress a mischievous glee, "one day all this will change."

Meanwhile, this side of the millennium, there is work to do. Back at the Valley of the Dawn, the last shift of the Burning Star ceremony has ended and the participants are inching single-file into the main temple, now thick with bittersweet incense haze and the industrious bustle of the evening's public healing sessions. Sending up hymns to the menagerie of spirits that watches over the valley, the procession snakes its way through the temple toward a brightly lit altar upon which, one by one, the mediums hand over their swords, their lances and the positive energies they have gathered from the ships. They are hardly noticed amid the incantations and censer smoke of a dozen or so simultaneous rituals filling up the nooks and crannies of this cave-like building. In one area, a bank of spirit-channeling mediums hears the sorrows of afflicted visitors and directs them to the proper ritual treatment; in another, a séance table attempts to instruct unruly and bad-tempered spirits in love of God and their fellow souls; here and there, decoratively chained "prisoners" – mediums committed to a temporary and figurative state of bondage in order to pay off a karmic debt – dart through the crowds with pen and notebook in hand, trying to solicit enough sympathetic signatures to secure their "release."

At the center of all these goings on, hovering in mid-air, hangs a larger-than-life photo-portrait of a tough-looking middle-aged woman. Her face lurks somewhere beneath a Kabuki-esque excess of makeup, her varnished, jet-black bouffant adds at least four inches to her height, and her name is well known to anyone within shouting distance of the picture: She is Aunt Neiva. Or was. Aunt Neiva "deincarnated" the same year as Master Yokaanam, coincidentally or not, and though the valley has continued to thrive without her, there seems to be in everything the locals say and do a melancholy trace of longing for the woman whose powerful clairvoyance and radiant charisma brought the Valley of the Dawn into being. For the first 32 years of Neiva Chaves Zelaya's life, that woman remained hidden, even from Neiva herself, beneath a more-or-less typical Brazilian existence: She was born in the drought-plagued Northeast, grew up amid its rural poverty, became a wife, became a widow, strove mightily to raise four children on her own. It wasn't until 1957, when she came to work on the construction of Brasília as a truck driver (allegedly, as the first woman so licensed in Brazil), that the visitations began. At first, she thought she was going insane: Voices came to her, and visions, at the most inopportune moments. She was pestered and cajoled by beings calling themselves Mother Yara and Father White Arrow, who sought to convince her that they were her spiritual mentors and that she had a great and prophetic work to carry out.

After two years, she relented, leaving Brasília to found a small community and orphanage in the nearby state of Goiás – and to deepen her psychic abilities. Before long, her powers grew so evolved that she was living simultaneously on the earthly and the astral planes. On this side of the Great Divide, she continued the worldly struggle to sustain and uplift her now expanded "family"; on the other, she studied with a wise Tibetan monk, conversed with historical personages from the Roman Empire and the French Revolution, and went on joyrides in the Capelan space ships. Throughout this 10-year period she remained under the close guidance of Yara and White Arrow,

**Sending up hymns
to the menagerie
of spirits that
watches over the
valley, the
procession snakes
its way through
the temple toward
a brightly lit altar
upon which, one by
one, the mediums
hand over their
swords, their
lances and the
positive energies
they have
gathered from
the ships.**



and when finally they directed her to the site of the Valley of the Dawn and told her to build a new city there, she didn't hesitate.

And from that point on, every element in the town's design, every new sculpture or waterway or communal building, was shaped by the direct inspiration of Aunt Neiva's extraterrestrial guides. Or so her followers claim. And yet to anyone arriving in the Valley of the Dawn from Brasília today, it's clear that the deeper inspiration behind the town lies much closer to home. Neiva's participation in the mythic creation of Brazil's new capital seems to have not only set her on her decades-long path to psychic pre-eminence, but pursued her as a kind of obsession throughout the length

of it; to wander among the abstract yet wildly ornamental structures that compose the Valley of the Dawn is to lose oneself in a bonsai, pop simulacrum of Brasília itself.

Nor does this correspondence limit itself to the realm of the physical. The valley simulates Brasília organizationally as well, dividing its members into an elaborate hierarchy that seems to parody the complex bureaucracies that enmesh the federal capital and employ (at their lower levels) a good many of the valley's residents and adherents. Ethnographer James Holston has even suggested that the petition drives of the "prisoners" secretly mime the endless politicking and electioneering of Brasília's most prominent citizens.

If all this is true, then the valley is not in direct contact with the source of its magic at all, but stands instead at a baroque double remove from it, fetishizing a city that is itself nothing more than a fetish of national develop-

ment. Like the Eclectic City, then, the Valley of the Dawn is a shadow of the shadow of a longstanding and perennially broken promise of a better life for the people of Brazil, and as such, any realistic critique would have to see this would-be phantom state as merely a sad state of affairs, a twice-faded descent from hard-headed political purpose into airy and ineffectual fantasy.

But any realistic critique, of course, would miss the point by a margin wide enough to fly a space fleet through. The genius of the Valley of the Dawn, of the Eclectic City, of the visions of Iara Kern and Efigênia Dias Bicalho, is that they transform a soulless reality into a very real magic. They effect a healthy perversion of Brasília's developmentalist energies into a spiritual and healing developmentalism (a project that was never more urgent than now, when Brazil has become the chief battlefield in the holy world war to achieve sustainable development). And in the process they provide genuine comfort to people whom fate and the state have failed repeatedly.

To recognize this achievement is to step decisively outside the terms of the urban-studies debate that still rages around Brasília. Die-hard modernists cling with fierce pride to the ideals of abstract grace the city embodies, while post-modern populists just as fiercely attack its inhuman design, and the populists

are right of course: Brasília wasn't built for humans. But the aliens it was built for started moving in a long time ago, and as it happens, they're a remarkably well-intentioned bunch. They may or may not save humanity from itself in the end, but already they've succeeded in making their hometown a healthy place for human habitation.





Centuries' Ends, Narrative Means

edited by Robert Newman

Stanford University Press, 1996

Reviewed by Michele Sabto

As is the way with anthologies, especially ones that grow out of conferences, like this one, *Centuries' Ends, Narrative Means* really pushes its thematic envelope. Casting its net wide over cultural practices that comment on, or occur at, ends and beginnings, this collection of essays demonstrates that the catalogue of *fin de siècle* tropes is endless: decadence, collapse, exhaustion and degeneracy, hysterical renderings of sexual and political anarchy, pastoral myths of a lost golden age, apocalyptic visions of new totalizing orders.

The contributors to this volume are not interested in putting the truth claims of these stories to the test. It is their interpretive pulling power, the question of the appeal they held (and hold) for their different audiences – situated in time and place – that is always at issue. And it is this insistent attention to the specifics of history and place that, in the end, draws these otherwise diverse essays together; it means that the critiques of modernity embedded in them avoid, as Rita Felski puts it, the trap of “reproducing [the] gesture of historical overcoming... that is endemic to the logic of the modern itself.”

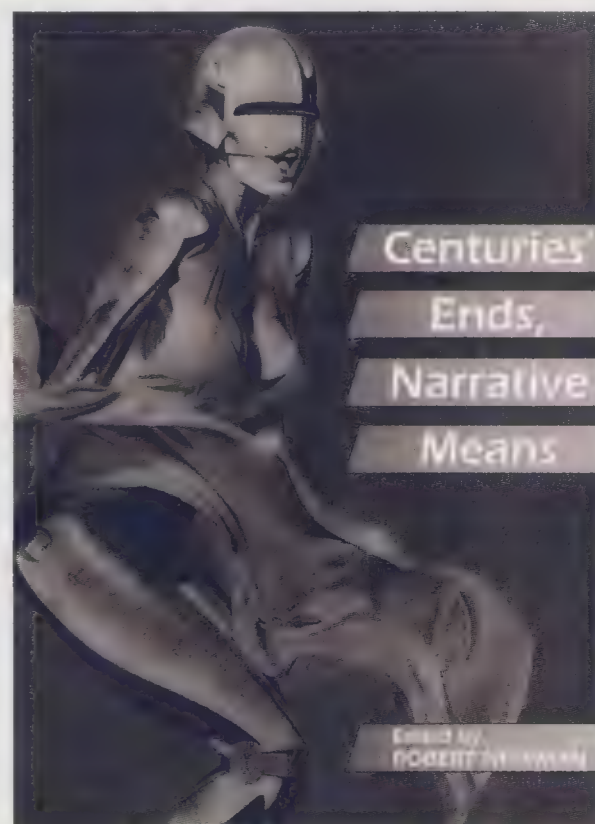
Brook Thomas, whose subject is the quintessentially American narrative of ending and beginning, the frontier, begins his contribution with a familiar demystifying move: The power of this national narrative lies largely in its successful glossing of the violent border warfare that lies at its heart. But as Thomas shows, the reconstructive powers of the frontier resist complete demystification because they possess a metaphorical character. The frontier was not only a place of American

renewal, it was also a space of supplementation, “making possible a narrative of American history in which conflicts could be endlessly deferred rather than dialectically resolved.” For frontier mythmakers, the lands to the west, free of the accretions of tradition and history, were a space of utopian and liberatory promise, enabling a narrative in which a common human community overcoming cultural differences could be built. The active forgetting required by this process of Americanization bothers Thomas, and in this he is not alone. The essays in this volume are all, in one way or another, anxious about the status of memory and history in the rush to be done with the past and to embrace the new. Rita Felski brings us a deftly sketched and sharply critical picture of the general cultural appropriation of the figure of transexuality as an icon for the postmodern era. The sexual mutability of Madonna, Michael Jackson and La Cicciolina is echoed in contemporary critical theory: “Male theorists such as Derrida, Deleuze and Baudrillard himself profess their desire to ‘become woman’ by aligning themselves with a feminine principle of undecidability and masquerade....” Felski reminds us that anxieties about change have long been allayed by a displacement onto the figure of woman, coded as similarly undecidable, risky and dangerous. Where, in other words, has our intellectual memory gone?

An interesting though unintended theme emerging from this collection is the relationship between forgetting and the psychic structures of mourning. In his essay “The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic,”

David Foster notes that futurists who celebrate the imminent arrival of the post-human often take a markedly hostile attitude to the flesh, deriding their humanist critics as meat-bound, their arguments as “carbon-based chauvinism.” It seems that the task of vacating the embodied body is so urgent it requires an aggressive act of mourning, for as Steven Mullaney tells us, the process of mourning is often accompanied by an aggressiveness toward the lost object (dead person) in order to facilitate detachment.

Foster’s essay revolves around the sexy, eroticized





robots or “gynoids” (mostly female) of Japanese commercial artist Hajime Sorayama. These metallic, reflective bodies, rendered in the conventions of soft-core pornography, complicate the heterosexual economy of fetishistic desire. “The feminized robot body, the very object that seems to offer reassurance against the threat female sexuality might pose to men, only conjures up the specter of another form of castration, posed by the technology of the robot body itself.” Jennifer Wicke’s contribution is an engaging take on David Cronenberg’s *The Fly*, a *fin de siècle* narrative that “meditates on the technologization of narrative’s body.” In a self-reflective manner, *The Fly* aligns sexual reproduction, at the level of plot, with representational reproduction (signaled by the film’s constant use of the computer and TV screen as frame) and again with social reproduction (Jeff Goldblum’s telepod “mimics childbirth, that mimics representing, that mimics that copying of social relations”). Wick finds this meta commentary on the multiple connections between narrative and technology everywhere in the film, and notes the protagonist’s “extraordinary efforts to produce himself as an object of study, a narrating, narrative body.”

These days, an American cultural-studies anthology doesn’t seem complete without Henry James, and David McWhirter serves up a respectable Jamesian offering that just manages to squeeze into the millennial theme. James’ novel *The Awkward Age* deals, like all of his novels, with the mannerly sociability of upper-middle-class life in turn-of-the-century America. Written during his so-called experimental phase, it is marked by writing that, even more than usual, is exhausting in its minute observation of a “particular social class in a particular national culture at a particular historical moment.” It is, paradoxically, the determinedly situated nature of *The Awkward Age*, the obsessive drive to capture precisely what it is about the time

and place that defines it as of the present, that marks it as a *fin de siècle* text – hyper-aware of its place in history. And in this, it reflects the careful historicism of the essays in *Centuries’ Ends, Narrative Means*, in which the various pasts of our modern day *fin de siècle* rhetorics stand up and are counted.

Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the

Postindustrial Age

by Claudia Springer

University of Texas Press, 1996

Reviewed by Norie Neumark

You can’t fantasize about your computer in the same way you did about your car. You can’t even be certain of the gender of these compact, grey plastic machines, with their microelectronic circuitry. But then, cars were tricky techno-erotic objects too. Despite their throbbing pistons and hard metal bodies, they were still gendered as female. And not everyone got off on, or in, their cars in any case. Which reminds us that the relationship between gender, sexuality and machines was already complex well before computers. The question Claudia Springer poses in *Electronic Eros* is whether that complexity has been mapped onto computers or whether a new techno-eroticism is being articulated. To analyze “bodies and desire in the Postindustrial Age,” she reads an unusual and engaging selection of popular-cultural texts, including comic books, sci-fi novels, films and television.

Springer’s central argument is that the “urge to assign gender to machines persists,” although that assignment is varied, conflicting and contradictory: from powerful masculinity (RAM); to a neat, fluid, quiet and empathetic femininity; to much-heralded gender-bending. The gender-assigning urge is now complicated by not only the physical difference in the machines but

also the postmodern destabilizing fascination with illusion and surface. And with death... as AIDS and fears of other personal and mass extinction erode a futuristic optimism that once colored the sci-fi and artificial-intelligence futures.

Fictional representations of cyborgs are a significant site of direct human-machine integration, where cultural conflicts about sexuality and gender roles are played out. For Springer, the cyberpunk human jacked into their machine is a metaphorical cyborg who “abandons” the body to attain heightened, cerebral sexuality in-side the matrix. Biological individuals may thus gain fluidity of sexual expression, but gender roles remain stereotypical. And the mind/body split also prevails. Even those cyborgs that inhabit techno-erotic bodies and manifest feminist freedoms from certain patriarchal constraints remain captive to memories as female humans.

The most frequent cinematic cyborg image, Springer suggests, is the “invincible armored man of steel,” a far more narrow figure than some of those in cyberpunk fiction and comic-book representations. She sees these figures as masculinist responses to the “mystery and miniaturization of technology and feminist changes in society.” Her reading of filmic and televisual texts here argues that interesting contradictions in the masculinism of this figure are often recuperated by narrative closure – again suggesting that basically patriarchal ideology has not changed.

The archetypal “female” cyborgs that Springer analyzes include the early modernist classic from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, Maria; and Eve, from the postmodernist TV series *Mann and Machine*. Where Maria represented a patriarchal fear of technology, and female sexuality as out of control, Eve has “advanced” to a naïveté and innocence that underscores a patriarchal femininity, her overt “feminist” strength notwithstanding. Despite



the limitations of the concept *patriarchy*, which tends to recuperate an argument back to its starting point, this is a very engaging and provocative section, as Springer allows herself an extended reading of her texts.

Springer's work itself has a certain exciting cyborg quality as she grafts the bodies of modernist theories of psychoanalysis and feminism onto a postmodern pastiche of film theory and other theories of culture. The free play of this cyborg is limited, however, by a publishing strategy that aims at the same time at two academic markets (film theory and feminist studies), a popular audience, and an introductory level (the back blurb promises it will be "accessible and entertaining for students and general readers as well as scholars"). Not an easy task, and made all the more difficult by the decision to re-fashion previously published academic articles for some of the book. The result involves repetition and a disappointing slide across the surface, which does not do full justice to the richness of Springer's field of objects, the theories she uses, or the breadth and depth of her understanding and insight. While this sort of publication very usefully introduces new readers to a variety of theorists, for other readers it can sometimes fall into a virtual catalogue of views. Which means that theorists' fundamental differences, even their own arguments, while intelligently alluded to cannot really be engaged with; and Springer's opportunity to elaborate her own position and arguments through extended analysis of cultural objects is unfortunately limited.

This also exacerbates certain problems in some of the theories Springer uses. For instance, traditional feminist theory of patriarchal ideology does not take adequate account of the way in which representation, performativity and power/knowledge strategies complicate "gender" and render its meanings less rigid and recuperative. Given that race, sexual preference, eth-

nicity and class also inflect gender, it's disappointing that they don't figure in the work more. While Springer acknowledges that a single unified reading is difficult and limited, the full development of a different way of reading is hampered by a publishing strategy that constrains her insightful and valuable work.

Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of

Human Violence

by Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson

Bloomsbury, London, 1997

Reviewed by Gisela Kaplan

Nature is like the Bible: One can find in it what one wants to find. And further, there is an implied authority in the source, to be taken on faith. *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence*, is a book that has to be taken on faith – if one is so inclined. The authors argue that only two animal species have systems of intense, male-initiated territorial aggression, including lethal raiding into neighborhoods with intent to kill. They say that such specific and intentional acts of violence are known only among chimpanzees and humans. Males of chimpanzees and humans are dangerous and vicious. Hence the title's "demonic" males. This is the book's central thesis, and it deserves some scrutiny.

However, the argument seems flawed. On close reading, the claim that these features of violence are unique to humans and chimpanzees cannot be upheld. For example, Australian magpies form strong coalitionary bonds in a territory. They will raid territory, and they can kill. The African mongoose, or meerkat, forms strong hierarchical territorial groups. They too will invade the territory of neighbors, and make deliberate attacks that can lead to the death of the opponent. The point of strongly hierarchical species is to defend and

possibly extend or improve territory and to weaken neighbors to achieve this aim. In terms of evolution, the meerkats are not high on the mammalian ladder, yet their behavior as a group is very similar to the fascinating description of chimpanzee behaviour offered by Wrangham and Peterson.

The story of the meerkat or the magpie suggests two things: Territorially based and coalitionary violence is not just a feature of the latest evolutionary developments; and the existence of similar forms of violence in species entirely unrelated to humans places doubt on the authors' main thesis. How many more similar cases might there be? By the authors' own admission, there are "4,000 mammals and ten million more other animal species." Making claims on the exclusive behavior of two species with any authority would require us to have detailed knowledge of the behavior of millions of species. But we do not. We know well the behavior of only a minute percentage of species. It is an extremely risky business to argue as exclusively as do these authors about uniqueness.

Violence, rape, murder, battering and beatings fill many of the pages of this book. Some are fascinating, others perhaps rather overdrawn. For instance, the supposed commonness of rape among orang-utans (which relates to the themes of reproduction and mating dealt with in my *Orang Utans in Borneo*, 1994) seems rather misrepresented. The gist of it is that adult males rarely rape. They do rape in zoos where space is confined and the option of activities have been shut down to very near zero, or in limited reserves – again, where space is an artifact of human-imposed restrictions. Those who do rape are so-called sub-adult males. They are not "grown males trapped in a juvenile body," as the authors claim, but promiscuous adolescents who try to steal a little sexual experience on the way to adulthood. Their rape has to be a surprise attack on a group,



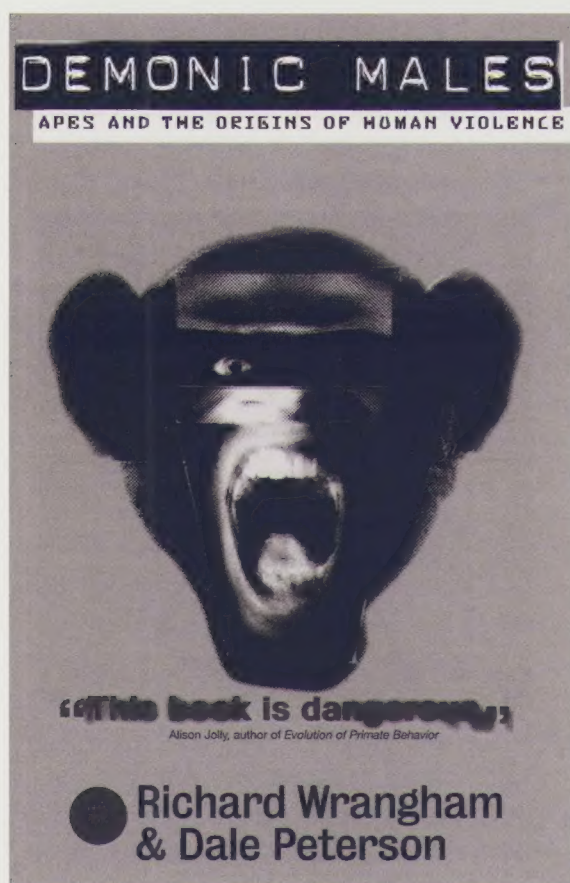
or it happens during consortship when the adult male is out foraging. Reproductive success in these rapes is very low, and I am not convinced that, in the case of orang-utans, such forceful ways of making acquaintances later lead them to better assume power. This

has all the paraphernalia of academic texts, with endnotes, appendices and a useful bibliography. It is also a clever book, a book that is fully aware of the different strands of current discourse (including evolutionary feminism) but which, at crucial points, dodges questions, anticipates objections and slips in counter-arguments, and then steams ahead with great bravura and conviction. It takes some time to find exactly what theoretical position the book actually attempts to advance. These positional statements are hidden within countless examples from the human and animal world.

One finds in the book two different themes. One is based on the discourse of socio-biology, the other is a utopian treatise for a better world. *Demonic Males* claims that we are aggressive as a species (or rather, human males are aggressive) and that this is because of our genes. The explanations are socio-biological: Because there is a reproductive advantage for being aggressive, aggression has been favored in evolutionary terms and been strengthened and maintained. This is a licence for aggression and even rape – humans got it from their predecessors, the chimpanzees. Differences are downplayed as “unsurprising,” and true to the anthropologist’s task, there are numerous examples given of peoples whose

That we are all a rather nasty species? Or that there is, after all, a difference between “civilized” and “primitive” people? Perhaps that is an unfair comment. Ironically, throughout the book the authors attempt to steer away from biologically deterministic positions (socio-biology: we can’t help what we are, because of our genes), and from culturally deterministic traditions (we behave as we do as a result of cultural evolution). The other theme contained in the volume is the quiet utopian dream. Despite the many pages describing violence and rape, we do get the optimistic ending – evolutionary ancestry does not condemn the human species to persist with violence. The book mentions, but thankfully dismisses, the eugenics argument that we can “breed out” violence by selective matings. But then we are asked to go against the “stain of our ape past,” or rather, the chimpanzee past. There is another (pygmy) chimpanzee, called Bonobo, that, with typical dramatization and exaggeration, the authors call “the most peaceful, unaggressive species of mammals living on earth today” (ignoring other equally unaggressive mammals such as the balleen whale). But these are not our ancestors, and so, they argue, “There is no arcadia, no paradise, no use to have dishonest and romanticized dreams in a primitive past. We must look to a future that rests on a proper understanding of ourselves.” It is nice to know that we can mend our ways, but why do we need the example of chimpanzees to show us that route? Who has dreams of the gentle ape or the noble savage today?

This book is a good read, and will no doubt be enjoyed by many. But I continue to be troubled by some of its messages, as they are incorrect, or at least distorting. Some books about animals are written in order to understand animals. Others are written in order to understand humans. The underlying problem with *Demonic Males* is that it is one of the latter. —



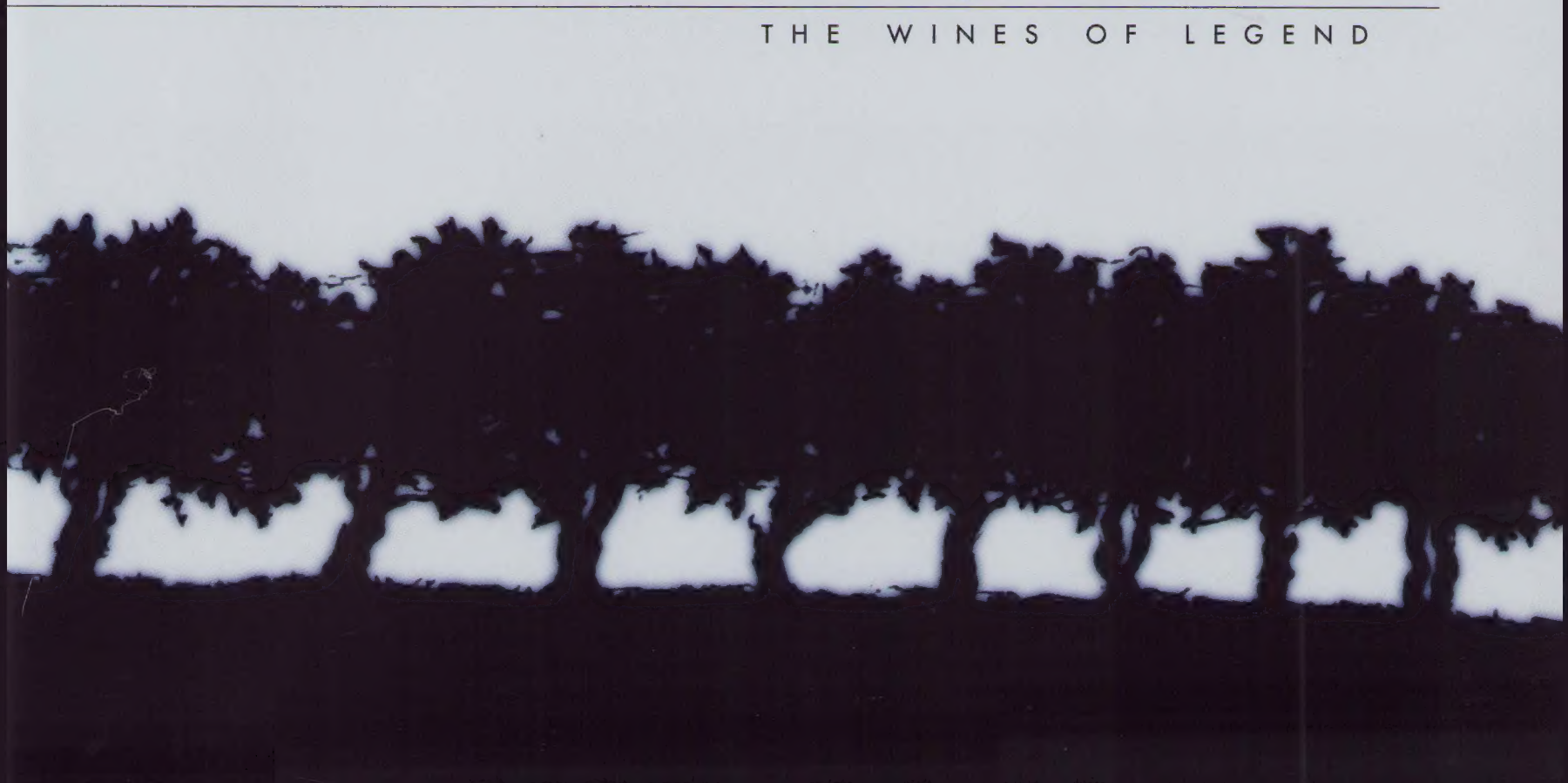
may be true of chimpanzees, but in the case of orang-utans, these remain rather debated and debatable issues.

Richard Wrangham is a well-known primatologist with detailed knowledge of chimpanzees and years of experience in the field. The book is well written, more like an adventure story than an academic text, although it

existence can be traced back a long way in human history, such as the Yanomamö in South America and the Australian Aborigines. What chimpanzees and these specific human groups have in common is that about one third of all their males die in violent conflict. Why are peoples who are deemed to be ancient, not to say “primitive,” cited as evidence? What does this prove?

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